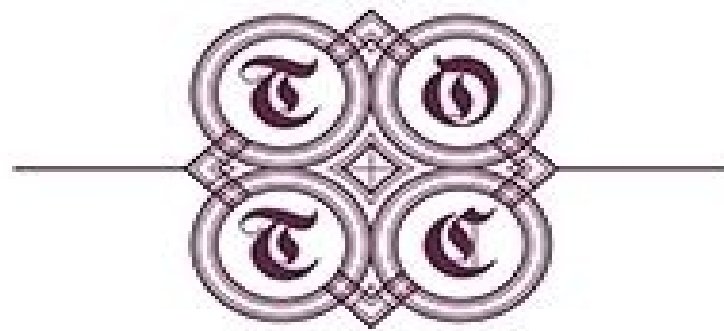


TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT
COMMENTARIES

TOTC

PSALMS



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**CONSULTING EDITOR: TREMPER LONGMAN
III**



PSALMS

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

TREMPER LONGMAN III

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GENERAL PREFACE

The decision completely to revise the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries is an indication of the important role that the series has played since its opening volumes were released in the mid-1960s. They represented at that time, and have continued to represent, commentary writing that was committed to both the importance of the text of the Bible as Scripture and a desire to engage with as full a range of interpretative issues as possible without being lost in the minutiae of scholarly debate. The commentaries aimed to explain the biblical text to a generation of readers confronting models of critical scholarship and new discoveries from the Ancient Near East, while remembering that the Old Testament is not simply another text from the ancient world. Although no uniform process of exegesis was required, all the original contributors were united in their conviction that the Old Testament remains the word of God for us today. That the original volumes fulfilled this role is evident from the way in which they continue to be used in so many parts of the world.

A crucial element of the original series was that it should offer an up-to-date reading of the text, and it is precisely for this reason that new volumes are required. The questions confronting readers in the first half of the twenty-first century are not necessarily those from the second half of the twentieth. Discoveries from the Ancient Near East continue to shed new light on the Old Testament, whilst emphases in exegesis have changed markedly. Whilst remaining true to the goals of the initial volumes, the need for contemporary study of the text requires that the series as a whole be updated. This updating is not simply a matter of commissioning new volumes to replace the old. We have also taken the opportunity to update the format of the series to reflect a key emphasis from linguistics, which is that texts communicate in larger blocks rather than in shorter segments such as individual verses. Because of this, the treatment of each section of the text includes three segments. First, a short note on *Context* is offered, placing the passage under consideration in its literary setting within the book, as well as noting any historical issues crucial to interpretation. The *Comment* segment then follows the traditional structure of the commentary, offering exegesis of the various components of a passage. Finally, a brief comment is made on *Meaning*, by which is meant the message that the passage seeks to communicate within the book, highlighting its key theological themes. This section brings together the detail of the *Comment* to show how the

passage under consideration seeks to communicate as a whole.

Our prayer is that these new volumes will continue the rich heritage of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries and that they will continue to witness to the God who is made known in the text.

David G. Firth, Series Editor

Tremper Longman III, Consulting Editor

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The book of Psalms is the heart of the Old Testament. Athanasius, the important fourth-century Church Father, called the Psalms 'an epitome of the whole Scriptures'. In the same century, Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea, pointed out that this collection of poems presents 'a compendium of all theology', and Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century Reformer, called the book of Psalms 'a little Bible, and the summary of the Old Testament'.

Indeed, the Psalms are not only the heart of the Old Testament; they are a pivotal witness and anticipation of Jesus Christ, and thus a perfect illustration of Augustine's statement that 'the New Testament is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed'. Jesus made this clear when he told his disciples that the Psalms spoke of him (Luke 24:44).

It is crucial to note that the book of Psalms is not a theological textbook, but rather the libretto of the most vibrant worship imaginable. The book of Psalms does not only want to inform our intellect, but to stimulate our imagination, arouse our emotions and stir us on to holy thoughts and actions.

I begin by acknowledging the debt that I owe to Derek Kidner (1913–2008), the author of the Psalms commentary in the first edition of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series. I never met him, but he was the external reader of one of my very first books, *How to Read the Psalms* (IVP, 1987), and he gave me invaluable advice on how to organize the chapters of that book. I shudder to think that my commentary will be compared with his incisive, tightly written, insightful work, though I dare to offer it with the hope that it might help those who want to understand, teach and preach this powerful collection of poems, songs and prayers.

I also want to thank my best friend of the past forty-eight years (we met when we were thirteen), Dan Allender. Dan is a Christian psychologist who wants his counselling to be based on the Bible, and he has taught me more than anyone to read the Psalms as a 'mirror of the soul' (Calvin). Together we wrote *Cry of the Soul* (NavPress, 1994), a book which looks at our emotional lives through the prism of the Psalms. My work with Dan significantly prepared me to write this commentary.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Raymond Dillard (1944–1993), my teacher, mentor, friend and colleague, whose early death happened just over twenty years ago. He taught me to be honest with the text and, most importantly, to read the

Old Testament in the spirit of Luke 24, in other words, Christologically. The reader will notice that, while honouring the original meaning of the text in its Old Testament context, I also offer a Christian reading of the psalm in the Meaning section of the commentary.

I have taught the Psalms in many different institutions over the thirty-some years of my teaching career. Unfortunately, there are too many students, some of whom are now professors and ministers, to name, but I thank them for the influence they have had on me as we have interacted over the text of the Psalms.

I do want to thank one institution in particular, namely Westmont College, where I am the Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies. Westmont and its administration (particularly Gayle Beebe, the president, and Mark Sargent, the provost) have provided a wonderful environment for my writing and teaching. I could not be working at a better place.

David Firth, the editor of the second edition of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, has done a masterful job helping me write this commentary. I deeply appreciate his insight and also his aiding me to make this the best commentary I can offer. Of course, any errors remain my own.

No-one loves the Psalms more than my wife Alice. She has not only memorized the entire book of Psalms, but she understands them and appreciates them particularly as a witness to Christ. She has read my manuscript and deepened my reading of them. I dedicate this book to her.

Tremper Longman III
Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies
Westmont College
New Year's Day 2014

CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Anchor Bible Commentaries
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentaries
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BCOTWP	Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms
DCH	<i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> , ed. D. J. A. Clines, 6 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 1993–2008)
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplementary series
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
LXX	Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament)
MT	Massoretic Text
NIBC	New International Bible Commentary
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. Willem A. VanGemenen, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997)
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
REBC	Revised Expositor's Bible Commentary
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

Bible versions

- ESV English Standard Version, published by HarperCollins Publishers © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers
- KJV King James Version
- NAB New American Bible, copyright © 1995 by Oxford University Press, Inc. New York
- NEB New English Bible, copyright © Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press, 1961, 1970
- NET Bible New English Translation, copyright © 1996 by Biblical Studies Press
- NIV New International Version, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.
- NJB New Jerusalem Bible, copyright © 1985 by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd and Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group inc.
- NLT New Living Translation, copyright © 1996 [2004, 2007]. Anglicized version copyright © 2000
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA
- REB Revised English Bible, copyright © Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press 1989

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INTRODUCTION

1. Title of the book

Readers of the English Bible know the book as Psalms, which in its present form in the Protestant Bible has 150 separate poems, many of which were addressed to God (prayers) and all of which were likely sung (songs). The title ‘Psalms’ comes from the Greek via the Septuagint (*psalmos*; see also in the NT [Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20]), which is a translation of the Hebrew *mizmôr* found in over sixty psalm titles (see below). *Mizmôr* is a noun form derived from the verbal root *zāmar*, which means ‘to make music’ or ‘to sing praise’. In Jewish tradition, the book is known as Tehillim, the plural of *tēhillâ*, and thus means ‘Praises’ or ‘Hymns’. This title acknowledges that, even though laments outnumber the hymns in the book, the predominant tone is praise.

2. Titles to the individual psalms

Most psalms begin with a title. While the Hebrew text assigns a verse number (in rare cases, two) to the title, English translations do not, but typically translate the title using italics, giving the incorrect impression that they were not a part of the canonical text.^[1] The titles were certainly not written by the original composer of the text, but rather by a later editor. However, they were added to the text before the close of the canonical period, probably by the editors who were responsible for the final organization of the book. They thus, at least, represent early tradition, and interpretation of the psalms should take into account the information in the title. Indeed, these titles should be considered canonical. After all, most biblical books reached their final form under the influence of later, unnamed redactors. Furthermore, we should note that, though added later, these titles were added early enough, so that by the time of the first major Greek translation of the Psalms in the second century BC, the translators had lost knowledge of the meaning of some of the technical terms in them (e.g. *lamēnaṣṣēah*, which they took to mean ‘to the end’ rather than ‘for the director of music’).

Many psalms share similar features in their titles, so rather than treating the titles with each individual psalm, we will describe them here. We treat the titles early in the Introduction because they provide helpful information as we consider the issues of the composition, collection, organization and use of the psalms (next section).

The vast majority of psalms (116) have a title; those that do not are often referred to as ‘orphan psalms’. Some titles are short and others provide more information. The types of titles may be categorized as providing information about authorship (and more rarely, the historical event that led to the poem’s composition [historical titles]), musical titles, genre titles, titles that indicate the setting in which the psalm was used (performance titles) and liturgical titles.

We should also note that among the many questions surrounding the meaning of the titles is the issue of whether some of the editorial material that precedes the psalm is actually a colophon (an editorial note that occurs at the end of a literary composition) that goes with the preceding psalm. In recent years, Waltke has made the strongest case for the view that any information that precedes the mention of literary genre or authorship actually goes with the previous psalm (Waltke, 1991). While this remains a possibility, it is not certain, and we will simply explain the meaning of the titles as far as we are able in what follows.

a. Authorship titles and historical titles

Many psalms name an individual or a group with a prefixed *lamed* preposition. The most common by far is *ledāwid* (almost half the psalms), but others are associated with Jeduthun (Pss 39, 62, 77), Moses (90), Solomon (72, 127), the Sons of Korah (42 [– 43], 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 84, 85, 87, 88), Asaph (50, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83), Heman the Ezrahite (88) and Ethan the Ezrahite (89).

First, we note that the Hebrew preposition *lamed* can be taken in a number of different ways. Using *ledāwid* as our example, this theoretically could be rendered:

Of David or By David (indicating authorship)
Concerning David
In the tradition of David
For David('s use)
Dedicated to David

The first meaning indicating authorship is the traditional way of understanding the phrase, and there are sufficient reasons to believe that the editors did intend to so attribute authorship. Certainly, the historical titles indicate that the early editors took the phrase that way.

The historical titles are titles that name the event in the composer's life that led to the writing of the psalm in the first place. There are thirteen psalms, all connected to David, that have a historical title (Pss 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142). The title of Psalm 18 is particularly noteworthy, since it speaks explicitly of David's writing activity: 'Of David the servant of the LORD. He sang to the LORD the words of this song when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said').

Thus, it seems likely that it was the intention of the later editors of the psalms who added the titles to use the preposition *lē* to indicate the original composer of the psalm. Various arguments have been levied against the idea that David could have written all (or any) of the psalms attributed to him. One of the strongest arguments is that sometimes 'Davidic' psalms mention the temple (Pss 5, 11, 18, 27, 29, 30, 68), but of course the temple was not built until the time of his son and successor Solomon. To many, the appearance of the temple in a psalm invalidates the idea that David wrote it. In response, we might suggest that, although the temple was not built during David's reign, he certainly knew it was to be built soon afterwards. According to 1 Chronicles, he spent considerable time gathering materials and organizing the priesthood for the temple. Perhaps he also wrote some songs for use in the temple. Or perhaps psalms were later

updated for use in the temple after his death.

In any case, the cautious statement by N. T. Wright takes us in the right direction:

Our knowledge of Israel's early history is patchy at best, forming a very uneven surface on which to hit the billiard-balls of ancient evidence around the table. One cannot prove that any of the Psalms go back to King David himself, but one cannot prove, either, that none of them do. Many of them clearly reflect both the language and the setting of much later periods. As with our modern hymn-books, this may be due to subsequent editorial activity, or it may be that they were composed by writers who thought of themselves as standing within a poetic tradition they themselves believed to go back to Israel's early monarchy.

(Wright 2013: 4)

We should also point out that the tradition that David was a musician is a well-established one in the historical and prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible (e.g. 1 Sam. 16:15–23; 2 Sam. 1:17–27; 22; 23:1–7; 1 Chr. 6:31; 15:16; 16:7–36; 25:1; 2 Chr. 29:30; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:24–47; Ps. 18=2 Sam. 22; Amos 6:5) and supports the idea that he had a significant role in the production of songs that were used in the formal worship of Israel.

As we listed above, David was not the only person associated with the composition of the psalms; the following were as well:

Moses: The title of Psalm 90 attributes the composition of the song to Moses, the well-known lawgiver and leader of Israel out of Egyptian bondage. The debate over Moses as a writer of Scripture is much too complex to go into at this juncture.

Solomon: The titles of Psalms 72 (though see v. 20 that suggests it was a psalm of David) and 127 attribute their composition to the well-known second king of Israel.

Asaph: Twelve psalms are attributed to Asaph (50; 73 – 83). Chronicles first presents him as one of three musicians (see below on Heman and Ethan) who presented music before the Lord as the ark of the covenant was brought to Jerusalem (1 Chr. 15:16–22), and after the ark had returned David appointed these three to continue to be in charge of the music at the tabernacle, and then at the temple after Solomon had built the temple (1 Chr. 6:31–47). Asaph was remembered as a 'seer' at the time of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 29:30). Interestingly, some of the psalms attributed to him include divine oracles (Pss 50, 75, 81, 82). The turning point of Psalm 73 comes as the psalmist enters into the sanctuary. 1 Chronicles 16:7 implies that Asaph is the one in charge of the temple music (and the nascent book of Psalms) as he accepts a psalm written by David for use in worship. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah note the existence of descendants of Asaph (or perhaps a guild of temple musicians) who are involved with the

music in the Second Temple period (Ezra 2:41; 3:10; Neh. 11:22 [where an Asaphite named Uzzi is called ‘the chief officer of the Levites’]; 12:46).

Heman the Ezrahite: The title of Psalm 88 associates the poem with Heman the Ezrahite. Note also that it is associated with the Sons of Korah, although the relationship between the two in the production of the psalm is unknown. Heman the Ezrahite is noted as a wisdom figure in 1 Kings 4:31. There is also a Levitical musician named Heman, associated with Asaph and Ethan in 1 Chronicles 6:31–48 and elsewhere dated to the time of David. Perhaps the two are the same person.

Ethan the Ezrahite: The title of Psalm 89 associates the poem with Ethan the Ezrahite. Ethan, like Heman, is called a sage in 1 Kings 4:31. He is connected to Asaph through Heman in the genealogy of tabernacle/temple musicians at the time of David and Solomon (1 Chr. 6:31–48).

Jeduthun: Three psalms are associated with Jeduthun (Pss 39 [also David], 62 [also Sons of Korah], 77 [also Sons of Korah]). Jeduthun, a musician at the sanctuary at the time of David (1 Chr. 16:38–41; 25:1–6), was also around at the time of the dedication of the temple (2 Chr. 5:12). It is possible that Jeduthun was the director of music to whom David (in the case of Ps. 62) and the Sons of Korah (in the case of Pss 62 and 77) gave their compositions. Thus, the NIV translates: ‘For Jeduthun’.

Sons of Korah: Psalms 42 (– 43) – 49, 84 – 85, 87 – 88 are attributed to the Sons of Korah. Korah was a descendant of Kohath, the son of Levi (Exod. 6:21), thus a cousin of Aaron. Korah, along with some Reubenites, rebelled against the God-given authority of Moses and Aaron and was killed by the Lord as a consequence. Nonetheless, his descendants became prominent in the service of the temple. At the time of Jehoshaphat, they are said to have ‘stood up and praised the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice’ (2 Chr. 20:19). During the post-exilic period, they are mentioned as gatekeepers and bakers (1 Chr. 9:19, 31–32).

Finally, we need to remind ourselves that, even if we are right that the authorship titles are reliable, these composers did not write for the purpose of making their own experiences public and memorable, but rather, using these experiences, they wrote songs that could be used by later worshippers who find themselves in similar, though not necessarily identical, situations (see below).

b. Genre titles

Some titles appear to be native genre designations. Some (like psalm and song) are quite general, and others that may be specific are technical terms that we do

not understand well. In the latter case, it is the practice of most modern translations simply to transliterate the word. The NLT is an exception and makes the best guess possible based on the proposed meaning of verbal roots of the nouns. Sometimes the translation is a general term (*maškil* is often rendered ‘psalm’). These ancient genre designations do not conform to the ones modern researchers find helpful (see below). It should be noted that some psalms have more than one of these genre designations in their title.

Psalm (*mizmôr*): Over sixty poems have ‘psalm’ in the title. *Mizmôr* is a noun form derived from the verbal root *zāmar*, which means ‘to make music’ or ‘to sing praise’. Psalm 145 has the slightly longer title, ‘a psalm of praise’.

Song (*šîr*): The simple designation ‘a song’ appears in fourteen psalms. Fifteen additional psalms have the fuller title, ‘A song of ascents’ (for which see the excursus before Ps. 120, p. 409). One psalm has the title, ‘A wedding song’ (see Ps. 45). As with the title ‘psalm’, this title underlines the musical nature of this collection of poems.

Prayer (*tēpillâ*): The psalms are often directly addressed to God and thus are prayers, but only Psalms 17, 86, 90, 102 and 142 have ‘prayer’ in the title.

Petition (*lēhazkîr*): The NIV translates the Hebrew phrase *lēhazkîr* in Psalms 38 and 70 as ‘a petition’, although most other translations take the phrase as closer to the base meaning of the verbal root *zākar* (‘to remember’). Thus, the NRSV translates ‘for the memorial offering’, and the NLT takes it as ‘to remember him’.

***Maškil* :** Three psalms are designated a *maškil* (Pss 32, 44, 45), five are a *maškil* of David (52, 53, 54, 55, 142), one is a *maškil* of the Sons of Korah (42 [–43]), two are designated *maškil* of Asaph (74, 78), and one each for Heman (88) and Ethan (89). The verbal root *šākal* in the *qal* means ‘to have success’, and thus some take it as an ‘efficacious psalm’ (Brueggemann, in Longman and Enns, 2008: 618–619). In the hiphil, the root means ‘to understand, to make wise, to act with insight’, leading to the Greek version’s translation ‘(a psalm) of understanding’. The contents of the psalms are too varied to make a final determination.

***Šiggāyôn*:** Psalm 7 is the only psalm called a *šiggāyôn*, but it is also a part of the title of the poem found in Habakkuk 3 (see v. 1). *Šiggāyôn* is thought by some to derive from the verbal root *šāgah*, which means ‘to stray, go astray, err, stagger’ and may ‘indicate a particular type of psalm with a sporadic rhythm or frenzied cadence’ (NIDOTTE 4: 44). Others take it as a specific type of lament, connecting the word with the Akkadian *šigû*, which means ‘to lament or dirge’.

***Miktām*:** Four psalms are called *miktām* (56, 57, 58, 59); two are a *miktām* of David (16 and 60). The verbal root of this noun is *kātam*, but the verb is not

attested in ancient Hebrew. An Akkadian cognate (*katāmu*) means ‘to cover’, but attempts to derive a meaning from that root remain unpersuasive. There is a noun *ketem* which means gold, but that does not seem relevant, though the KJV translates ‘A golden psalm’. Interestingly, the ancient versions (Greek, Latin and the Aramaic Targum) take *miktām* as a variant or a mistake for *miktāb* (‘writing’).

c. Musical and performance titles

For the director of music: Over fifty psalms have this title, and there is general consensus that it indicates that the psalms were entrusted to the care of the person in charge of worship at the sanctuary. Interestingly, 1 Chronicles 16:7 describes David handing a song to Asaph, the head Levitical musician.

Tunes: A number of phrases that appear in the titles are taken to refer to the tune of the song. Notice that ‘To the tune of’ is added to the Hebrew, which just gives what appears to be the name of the tune: ‘The Death of the Son’ (Ps. 9), ‘The Doe of the Morning’ (Ps. 22), ‘Lilies’ (Pss 45, 69), ‘A Dove on Distant Oaks’ (Ps. 56), ‘Do Not Destroy’ (Pss 57, 58, 59, 75), ‘The Lily of the Covenant’ (Ps. 60) and ‘The Lilies of the Covenant’ (Ps. 80). Attempts to derive significance from these names are overly speculative.^[2]

Voices and instruments: Some of the technical terms in the titles seem to call for certain types of musical accompaniment or singing. This seems clear in the titles that the NIV translates as ‘with stringed instruments’ (4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67, 76) and ‘for pipes’ (5). Other titles are more opaque and therefore simply transliterated in the NIV. These include the following: according to *gittîṭ* (8, 81, 84), according to *šēmînîṭ* (6, 12), according to ‘*ālāmôt* (46), according to *māḥālat* (53), according to *māḥālat lē ‘annôt* (88). The meaning of each of these has been the subject of wide-ranging speculation, but no persuasive translation has emerged.

d. Liturgical titles

Psalms 60 is said to be ‘for teaching’, 92 ‘for the Sabbath day’, and 100 ‘for giving grateful praise’. One more title in this category needs additional explanation:

‘For the dedication of the temple’ (30). This title raises a whole host of concerns, beginning with its appropriateness with the content of the psalm. Psalm 30 is a thanksgiving poem of a person who has been healed from an illness. Some interpreters point to the plague that preceded David’s buying of the

land on which the temple would later be built (2 Sam. 24), while others suggest that this title is actually a colophon that applies to Psalm 29, which is more compatible with the dedication of the temple.

Excursus: *Selāh* and *Higgāyôn*

In addition to the titles with their technical terminology, we have one example of a term that occurs along with the body of the poem, although it is clearly not a part of the poem. The term *selāh* occurs a little over seventy times in the psalms (also note three instances in the poem of Hab. 3), typically at the end of a poetic line. All these occurrences are found in the first Three Books of the Psalms (Pss 1 – 89), with the exception of Psalms 140 and 143.

Some believe it marks some kind of interlude, although the few times when it appears in the middle of a thought argues against that interpretation (see Ps. 68:7–8 as an example). Most translations leave the term untranslated (except the NLT, which translates ‘Interlude’). The NIV (2011) has placed all the occurrences of *selāh* in a footnote. In 9:16, *selāh* is preceded by the word *higgāyôn*, which is also typically untranslated. Perhaps it is connected with *higgāyôn* in Lamentations 3:62 (‘whisper’), leading to a translation of *higgāyôn selāh* as ‘Quiet Interlude’ in the NLT.

3. Composition, collection, organization, use

The book of Psalms is a unique book in the Bible in terms of how it came to its final form and how it was used during the biblical period, although Song of Songs is similar in being a collection of poems.³

a. Composition and collection

Taking the authorship ascriptions and the historical titles seriously, psalms were written in response to the composer's experience of God's presence or absence during a specific historical episode in life. Using Psalm 51 as an example, the prayer was written by David after Nathan the prophet confronted him concerning his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. The historical title takes the reader to 2 Samuel 11 – 12 to fill out the details of the story. Reading the psalm in the light of the historical account, we immediately recognize that it fits well with David's appropriately remorseful attitude at the time.

That noted, we may also see clearly that, although the psalm fits well with the named historical incident, the psalm itself does not embed that event in its contents. Psalm 51:2 reads:

Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

Not:

Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin of adultery.

The composer wrote the psalm in this fashion intentionally, so that his prayer, born out of a particular historical moment, could be used by those who come after him who find themselves in a similar, though not necessarily identical, situation. One does not have to be an adulterer to use the psalm as a model for one's petitions. Interestingly, 1 Chronicles 16:7 and following provides support for this understanding of the composition of the psalms. Here we see David handing over a new psalm that he composed to Asaph, the lead sanctuary musician, presumably for use in Israel's worship.

Thus, we have hints that people like David (see 'Authorship titles' above) composed psalms and then handed them over to the sanctuary leaders who collected them over time. In terms of the date of composition, the authorship titles would have us believe that the earliest psalm comes from the time of

Moses (Ps. 90) and, from their contents, the latest ones from the exilic (Ps. 137) and post-exilic (Ps. 126) periods, thus throughout the entire period of the production of what Christians call the Old Testament.

A close reading of some psalms indicates that additions could have been made at the end of an earlier psalm. Psalms 51 and 69 are good examples: both are attributed to David and both are individual laments. Both, however, also end with appeals for God to remember the community, suggesting that they were added during the post-exilic period (see Pss 51:18–19; 69:35–36).

Finally, in terms of collection, we should note that there are three groups of psalms that probably came into the book at the same time. First, there are the songs of the Sons of Korah (a Levitical musician), mentioned in the titles of Psalms 42, 44 – 49, 84 – 85 and 87 – 88. Second, we have the songs of Asaph (another Levitical musician) in Psalms 50, 73 – 83. Finally, there are the songs of ascent in Psalms 120 – 134 (for the meaning of this title, see the excursus before Ps. 120, pp. 409–410).

b. Organization

But what can we say about the final organization or structure of the book of Psalms? Clearly, the new psalms were not simply added at the end, or at least we can be sure that, in its final form, the book of Psalms does not begin with the oldest and end with the youngest compositions. Indeed, in the one editorial note that we have, it is clear that the structure was changed during the many years that preceded its final form: ‘This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse’ (Ps. 72:20). What is particularly striking about this note is that there are a number of Davidic psalms that appear after it (Pss 138 – 145).

We can only guess at earlier forms of the book, so here we will occupy ourselves with the question of the final form of the book. We cannot offer a date when unnamed editors compiled the book in its present form, except to say that it was certainly in the post-exilic period.^[4]

The question of the structure of the book of Psalms has been a focus of attention since the mid-1980s and the publication of G. Wilson’s *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Wilson, 1985). Wilson, encouraged by the canonical interpretation of his teacher B. Childs, thought there might be a reason behind the present order of the psalms. He concluded that the order could be seen in the so-called ‘seam psalms’, those that occur at the beginning and end of the five Books of the Psalter. He was struck by the fact that many of them focused on the Davidic covenant. Psalm 1, he believed, was an introduction to the whole book, so Psalm 2 opened the first Book in earnest, and that psalm, with its allusion to

2 Samuel 7, celebrates the covenant of kingship conferred on David and his descendant. Psalm 41, which ends Book 1, only mentions David in the title, but when read as a psalm of David can be taken as a statement of confidence in the Davidic covenant. Psalm 72, ending Book 2, while naming Solomon as the composer in the title, is taken as a prayer for Solomon and thus is important for passing the covenant promises on from David to Solomon. Next, Book 3 ends with a psalm that for the first time speaks of David explicitly and, according to Wilson, concerns the demise of the Davidic dynasty. After this point, the final two Books of the Psalter concern God, not David or any other human, as king. Thus read, in the post-exilic period the book moves from a human king to God as King, the latter having messianic overtones.

Wilson's analysis is unsatisfying for a variety of reasons. First, he is selective in terms of the seam psalms that he uses. It is also debatable or doubtful that Psalm 89 ought to be read as an account of the end of the Davidic dynasty. Indeed, it does acknowledge that God seems to have turned his back on his promise to David, but we do not know how God chose to respond to the psalmist's appeal to change his attitude and come to the king's support. Furthermore, it is not true that the last two Books abandon interest in the human king and focus totally on the divine King. Psalm 132 is not only explicitly connected to the Davidic promise, but speaks of it in positive terms. Wilson argued that the editor's hands were tied, in that this psalm was included in a collection known as the psalms of ascent,^[5] but this reply seems inadequate.

While very few follow Wilson in his specific analysis, he inspired many to believe that there was an underlying reason for the systematic ordering of the psalms. The fact that their structures were significantly different from Wilson's and from each others' raises suspicions that, rather than discovering an order intended by the final editor, they are imposing a structure on the book.^[6]

While not persuaded by recent attempts to discover an overarching structure to the book of Psalms, I do agree that there are some intentional placements of certain psalms, particularly at the beginning and the end of the book. Psalms 1 and 2 serve as an introduction, and Psalms 146 – 150 are a fitting conclusion to the book of Psalms conceived as a literary sanctuary. That the Psalms are a literary sanctuary is not a new insight, since Jerome described it as a 'large house' (*magna domus*), with Psalms 1 and 2 serving as an entrance to this house. More recently, Janowski rightly said that 'the Psalms...are something like a *templum spirituale*, a temple not of stones but of words with the proem of Ps. 1 – 2 as wide "entrance portal" and the final Hallel of Ps. 146 – 150 as a resounding "keystone" ' (Janowski 2013: 348). I would further describe Psalm 1 as a gatekeeper of the literary sanctuary. The physical sanctuary had Levitical

gatekeepers who would restrict access to those who are righteous (see the entrance liturgies in Pss 15 and 24), so Psalm 1, with its description of the way of the righteous person who meditates on the law of God, and the way of the wicked, requires its reader to associate with one or the other. If righteous, the reader may proceed into the literary sanctuary and first encounter the Lord and his anointed one in Psalm 2.⁷ By the time of the post-exilic period during which the book arrived in its final form, Psalm 2 would have been read eschatologically, with the hope of a future Messiah (see commentary, pp. 59–64). Thus, the first two psalms introduce the important themes of law and Messiah.

Turning to the final five psalms, we are struck by the recurrent call to praise the Lord (*halēlû yāh*), culminating in Psalm 150, which contains one *halēlû yāh* after another. Such a tremendous doxology is fitting as one leaves the literary sanctuary.

Now, stepping back and looking at the movement from introduction to doxological conclusion, we might also observe that there is a general movement within the book from a predominance of laments at the beginning to a predominance of hymns at the end. Here may be the main reason why the book is called ‘Praises’ (Tehillim) in Jewish tradition. Even though there are more laments than hymns, the hymns overtake the laments so that one does have the impression when reading from beginning to end that God turns ‘wailing into dancing’ (Ps. 30:11a).

Before leaving the subject of the organization of the final form of the book, we should note that the editors divided the Psalms into five Books (Pss 1 – 41; 42 – 72; 73 – 89; 90 – 106; 107 – 150). There is some evidence in the use of the divine names that they may have gone through separate redactions. Book 1, for instance, may have been redacted at a time when Yahweh (occurring 272 times) was preferred over Elohim (occurring 15 times), while Book 2 has the opposite preference, with Elohim (207 times) more pervasive than Yahweh (74 times). Books 4 and 5 together use Yahweh 339 times and Elohim only 7 times. Book 3 uses Yahweh 13 times and Elohim 36 times. Each Book also ends with a doxology that is not a part of the psalm that ends the Book, but was added to conclude the Book itself. The division into five Books happened before the close of the Old Testament canon. The purpose may have been to draw an analogy with the Torah, which has been divided into five parts. If so, then the editors may have been making a statement that, although the psalms are prayers by people to God, they nonetheless have the same authority as word of God as the Torah. Seow points out that the connection between Torah and the Psalter is also signalled by the placement of the first psalm (see above): ‘The prominent mention of tora in Psalm 1 signals that the Psalter is to be read as tora – David’s

tora to be read alongside the tora of Moses. It prompts the reader to expect tora in the rest of the Psalter and to be guided by it' (Seow 2013: 219).

c. Use

The primary use of the book of Psalms, the literary sanctuary, during the Old Testament period was in the public corporate worship of Israel. Psalms has rightly been called the 'Hymnbook of the Old Testament'. Many lines of evidence come together to support this view.

We return first to 1 Chronicles 16:7 (see above), where David hands a psalm to Asaph, the chief of those Levites who were appointed 'to extol, thank, and praise the LORD, the God of Israel' (16:4). Asaph is also named as the composer of a number of psalms (50, 73 – 83). Heman and Ethan, to each of whom a psalm is ascribed (see Pss 88, 89), are likewise listed as Levitical musicians (1 Chr. 15:19).

Other aspects of the titles also point to the use of the psalms in public worship. Psalm 92 states that it is 'for the Sabbath day', and Psalms 120 – 134 are called psalms of ascent, sung while on pilgrimage to Zion (see excursus before Ps. 120, pp. 409–410).

The content of the psalms also points to a setting in public worship. Psalm 136 has a recurrent refrain which is best understood as the response of the congregation to the priest, as he sang the first part of each verse. In addition, the following are just examples of the descriptions of worship rituals that accompanied the singing of the psalms:

But I, by your great love,
can come into your house;
in reverence I bow down
towards your holy temple.
(5:7)

I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about your altar, LORD,
proclaiming aloud your praise
and telling of all your wonderful deeds.
(26:6–7)

I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
(63:2)

I will come to your temple with burnt offerings
and fulfil my vows to you –
(66:13)

Throughout the twentieth century, starting with the work of S. Mowinckel (1962), there have been attempts to specify a setting for the Psalms within the religious calendar of Israel. Mowinckel famously situated the Psalms within an annual New Year celebration in which Yahweh was enthroned again as King. Arthur Weiser spoke of the Psalms as a libretto of an annual covenant renewal ceremony, while Kraus believed that the book was used in conjunction with a Zion festival (Weiser, 1962; Kraus, 1988). While all three of them highlighted important themes within the Psalms, it appears wrong-minded to try to identify a single setting for their use. It is better simply to affirm that the book was used in the worship of the congregation of Israel.

Of course, the primary setting of Psalms in public worship did not prevent its use in private devotion, just as people today will sing from the church's hymnbook in the privacy of their own homes. There are examples of this in Scripture as well, including Hannah's (1 Sam. 2:1–11) and Mary's (Luke 1:46–56) use of Psalm 113 to praise God in response to the news that they were pregnant.

4. Genre and types of psalms

A genre is a class of texts that share formal traits, emotional expression and/or content. From the vantage point of the interpreter, genre is important because it triggers reading strategy. Authors send signals that help the reader know how to take their message. ‘Once upon a time’ is a well-known example of such a signal and would communicate to the reader that the author intends the text to be read as a fairy tale.

What is the genre of the book of Psalms? Though the book consists of 150 different compositions by a number of different writers, we can still provide an answer to the question on a broad scale. Psalms is a book of poetry, and in particular, lyric poetry, which expresses the inner emotions of the composer. That Psalms is a book of poetry triggers a reading strategy. However, since the topic deserves significant discussion, we will explore Hebrew poetry in the following section of the Introduction.

In this section, we will consider genre in the Psalms at a different level. After all, there are different types of lyric poetry, and in the Psalms we can recognize eight different types. We begin by describing the three most common types: hymns, laments and thanksgiving psalms.

a. Hymns

Hymns are songs of joy, intended for those occasions when life is going well. Brueggemann helpfully calls hymns ‘psalms of orientation’.^[8] The composer of a hymn and those who sing it are happy with God, their fellow worshippers and themselves. Psalm 98 is an excellent example of a hymn where the psalmist calls on others to join in the praise of God as Israel’s Victor, King and Judge.

b. Laments

If hymns are songs of orientation, laments are songs of disorientation, sung by those who are in distress. Psalm 69 is a typical lament, opening with an invocation and plea to God for help (v. 1, with further pleas in vv. 13–18). The composer continues by complaining about the circumstances of his life (vv. 1–4, 7–12, 19–21). As noted above (see Composition), while the complaints come out of a real-life and concrete situation, the psalmist writes in such a way that other worshippers who come afterwards can use the psalm as a model prayer for

similar, though not necessarily identical, situations. Many psalms, such as Psalm 69 (see vv. 5–6), also contain a confession of sin. Others (see Ps. 26) have rather a protestation of innocence. Many laments also include imprecations (69:22–28), or curses, against the enemy who has brought or intensified the psalmist’s distress (see below). Finally, and surprisingly, most laments (though not all, see Pss 88 and 143) end not in anguish, but with an expression of joy or a statement of confidence (69:30–36). In this way, the lament does not just express the distress of the person who suffers, but also begins to minister to that person by moving them towards a more positive attitude towards God and life. While most laments are those of individuals, there are also examples of community laments (see Pss 44, 60, 74, 79, 80, 89).

c. Thanksgiving songs

Thanksgiving songs are similar to hymns in their joyous expression, but they cite an earlier lament that God has answered. Westermann famously spoke of thanksgivings as narrative psalms of praise, as opposed to descriptive psalms of praise, in which ‘the deliverance from danger is recounted’ (Westermann 1989: 11). Thus, with thanksgivings, we complete the cycle with a song of reorientation. Psalm 30 provides a helpful example.

While opening with praise of God, the psalmist hints at his previous distressed situation, since his worship is motivated by God lifting him ‘out of the depths’ and not letting his ‘enemies gloat’ over him (v. 1). After calling others to worship along with him, he then recounts his previous trouble more specifically (vv. 6–7) and even remembers the earlier lament he had prayed (vv. 8–10). God answered and turned his ‘wailing into dancing’.

Along with the three major types of psalms, we can also recognize five others that occur less frequently: confidence, prophetic, wisdom, remembrance and royal.

d. Confidence

Psalms of confidence are recognized primarily by the psalmist’s expression of trust in God even in the face of opposition. Psalm 131 is a good example, where the psalmist compares his relationship with God to that of a weaned child, able to rest quietly with its mother. Indeed, as Psalm 23 (the classic example of a psalm of confidence) also demonstrates, these psalms often communicate their confident attitude through the use of striking metaphor. Jacobson and Jacobson rightly attest that the psalmists who write these poems ‘imagine courage in the

midst of chaos not as a result of intestinal fortitude but as an unexpected miracle, sparked by the faithful activity of God' (Jacobson and Jacobson 2013: 163). In a recent study, Pemberton points out that not all laments are answered by God, thus leading to thanksgiving (see above). Some, maybe even most, of the time, the sufferer who does not cave into pain moves to a position of trust (Pemberton, 2013).

e. Prophetic

A few psalms contain divine oracles, and often these psalms are called prophetic, on the assumption that a prophet connected with the sacred centre uttered the oracle on behalf of God. Thus, rather than prayers to God, like the majority of psalms, or even exhortations to the congregation on behalf of the worship leader, God is the speaker of most of these psalms. Psalm 50 is a good example of such a psalm, as is Psalm 81. Some psalms (e.g. 75, 92, 110) contain an oracle, but may be categorized as one of the other types of psalms.

f. Wisdom

Many psalms share language, concepts and concerns of wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs). When such similarities pervade a psalm, we classify it as a wisdom psalm. Thus, Psalms 1 and 119 may be compared to Proverbs; Psalm 73 to Job; Psalm 49 to Ecclesiastes; and Psalm 45 to Song of Songs (see commentary). This does not exhaust the list of wisdom psalms.

g. Remembrance

Many psalms look back to the past, particularly to the great acts of God's redemption. In laments, the psalmist looks to the past to gain confidence to live in a difficult present and hope for the future (see Ps. 77). In hymns, God's rescue (like from Egypt at the exodus) becomes the occasion for celebration (see Ps. 114).

A handful of psalms, though, focus on the past, as they rehearse God's intervention in Israel's history. Psalm 136 is a classic example, as it acclaims God's enduring love by remembering his creation of the world, his redemption at the exodus, and his establishing them in the land of promise. While Psalm 136 is a good example, each psalm should be studied individually, as they all utilize the traditions of the past in their own unique way. See Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135.

h. Royal

We classify a number of psalms as royal, in that they concern either God as King, or the human king. In terms of the latter, they may have the human king as the subject (Ps. 20), while others have the human king as the speaker. A question arises as to whether a psalm should be classified as royal if it has a Davidic title. For our purposes, we will only consider a psalm royal on that basis if the content indicates that the king is the speaker. We should point out that hymns, laments and other psalms may also be categorized as royal, so this type is a rather overlapping category.

5. Poetic style

As we have already observed, the book of Psalms is a book of poetry. No matter whether a hymn, lament or any other type, all the psalms are written in a poetic style. Accordingly, knowledge of Hebrew poetic conventions is helpful for proper interpretation of the book. While this is not the place for a full discussion of the nature of Hebrew poetry,⁹ we will introduce the main features (terseness, parallelism, imagery) and only a couple of secondary conventions that distinguish Hebrew poetry from prose.

a. Terseness

The first convention of Hebrew poetry is terseness, a word pointing to the poet's desire to communicate a message using as few words as possible. Readers can observe this feature by noting all the white space on a printed page of poetry. While prose is structured by sentences that form paragraphs, the components of poetry are parallel lines, composed of individual cola, which form stanzas. English translations, which typically use more words than are found in the Hebrew, nonetheless make this feature clear.

So how is terseness achieved? In a variety of ways, but we will mention just two. The first is a minimal use of conjunctions as well as the direct object marker. Conjunctions are small words, but they do communicate the relationship between clauses and sentences. Hebrew prose uses a direct object marker ('*et*'), which goes untranslated, but enables readers of the Hebrew to distinguish the direct object from the subject. These examples indicate how terseness increases the ambiguity of poetry relative to prose. A second common way in which a poet compresses language is through ellipsis. In a parallel line (see below), the second colon will omit a part of the first colon, with the understanding that the omitted part of the first colon is to be read into the second colon. Usually it is the verb that is omitted. An example of ellipsis is found in Psalm 88:6:

You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.

The verb is missing in the second colon, but of course we are to understand the sense of the second colon as:

(You have put me) in the darkest depths.

The effect of ellipsis is to bind two phrases together more closely, as well as to achieve economy of expression.

b. Parallelism

Parallelism is another distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry and refers to the echoing effect within a poetic line. Take Psalm 88:3 as an example:

I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death.

This poetic line is a typical two-part parallelism. The two parts are called cola (singular colon), and their connection is indicated in English translations by the slight indentation of the second colon to the first. While two-part parallel lines (called bicola) are the most common type of parallel line in Hebrew, there are examples of three-part (tricola) and (rarely) even more. We also have poetic lines that are a single colon, but these are typically opening statements in poems or climactic conclusions.

To interpret poetry with competence requires a knowledge of the relationship between the cola of a poetic line. We will refer to the first colon as A and the second as B. While many readers simply assume that B simply repeats A, essentially saying the same thing (A=B), such an understanding produces a flat reading and is not intended by the poet. Instead, we should realize that the second colon always carries forward the thought of the first colon, in what has been called an ‘A, what’s more, B’ pattern. (see Kugel, 1981; Alter, 1985; Berlin, 2009). The B colon intensifies, specifies or sharpens the thought of the first colon.

We can see this in our example from Psalm 88:3. The first colon speaks generally of troubles that overwhelm the composer, while the second colon specifies one particularly egregious trouble, and that is the threat of death.

While there is still some utility to the so-called types of parallelism (synonymous, antithetic, emblematic, staircase, etc.), interpreters are best served by simply keeping in mind the idea that the second colon carries forward and progresses the thought of the first (A, what’s more, B).

c. Imagery

Figurative language is not unique to poetry, but it is more pervasive than in prose. In this section, we will concentrate on the most common type of figurative language in the Psalms, namely imagery created by comparison, metaphor and simile.

Metaphor and simile liken two things that are alike in some ways, but different in others. The key to understanding metaphor and simile is to unpack the comparison. To do that well requires reflection, and that is another reason why the interpreter must ponder the poem and not read it too quickly. Imagery is yet another feature of poetry that compresses language; a few words can carry a lot of meaning.

Metaphor and simile typically compare two things, with the purpose of disclosing something about one of the two objects of comparison. Thus, something known is compared with something relatively unknown. This dynamic is readily seen in the multiple metaphors and similes used for God. God is beyond simple human comprehension, so in order to reveal something true about his nature, the poet will often turn to comparison. God is a King (Ps. 47), a Warrior (Ps. 98), a Shepherd (Ps. 23), a mother (Ps. 131), a drunken soldier (Ps. 78:65), a rock (Ps. 18:2), a fortress (Ps. 31:2), a powerful storm (Ps. 29), and the list goes on and on. Notably, most of these images are explicitly relational. Kings presuppose subjects, warriors an army, shepherds sheep. Even those metaphors and similes that are not explicitly relational are used in a relational manner. God is a rock in which we find protection. When it comes to God, metaphor and simile are apt ways of speaking about his nature, since figurative language does not only reveal, but it also conceals, imparting a sense of mystery. After all, metaphors speak indirectly about God, and at a certain point we are not sure whether or not we are taking the comparison too far.

The poet does not restrict use of imagery to God alone, of course. The enemies are dogs (Ps. 22:16), lions (Ps. 22:21), bees (Ps. 118:12) and more. He compares the righteous to a flourishing tree (Ps. 1) and himself to a worm (Ps. 22:6).

In the commentary that follows, we will attend to the metaphors, similes and other figurative devices employed by the poets.

d. Secondary poetical devices

Terseness, parallelism and imagery permeate Hebrew poetry. These conventions lead readers to recognize that a text is a poem rather than prose. Even so, there are other devices that the poets used that also generate interest in how something is said, as well as what is said. Many of these are not translatable. For instance, there are sound plays such as assonance, alliteration and various types of wordplay, but other conventions are also worth noting in the commentary, including the following:

Refrains. A refrain is a phrase or a verse that is repeated at least twice in a

poem. Refrains may help to structure a psalm into different sections (stanzas) and provide a sense of closure (see Pss 42 – 43). By use of repetition, they also highlight an important point of the psalm, and may even invite audience participation (as in Ps. 136). See Psalms 24, 42 – 43, 46, 49, 57, 67, 80, 99, 107 and 136.

Merism. Merism cites two poles of a matter and implies everything in between, and thus is another way of achieving concision of language. When the psalmist says, ‘You discern my going out and my lying down’ (Ps. 139:3a), he is saying that God knows his every action.

Personification. On occasion, the poet will treat an inanimate object as if it were a person, for poetic effect. In the final stanza of Psalm 98, for instance, the psalmist writes:

Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy.
(Ps. 98:8)

This particular example of personification lends vividness and excitement to the poem. It also furthers an expansion of the circle of praise that develops through the poem (see commentary).

Acrostics. An acrostic poem is one in which every poetic unit begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The best-known example is Psalm 119, the giant psalm, where all twenty-two stanzas begin each of its eight verses with a successive letter of the alphabet. This device gives a sense of order and completeness to the poem. For the acrostics in the book of Psalms, see Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 and 145.

Conclusion

The book of Psalms is a book of poetry. Poetry is a genre that triggers reading strategy (see above). Most importantly, poetry calls for reflective reading. We have seen under ‘Terseness’ that poetry is concise language. Parallelism calls for close reading, in order to see how the second and, for tricola, a third colon sharpens or intensifies the thought of the first colon. Imagery initiates a process of unpacking a comparison in a simile or metaphor that deepens our understanding of God, others or ourselves.

We also need to be aware of the intentional ambiguity of poetic language, which serves to restrain our tendency to over-interpret the psalm.

For those who think of the Bible simply as a book of information, the question arises as to the presence of poetic language there. Prose communicates

information much more precisely and efficiently, and if that were the sole goal of the Bible, then poetic language would be a liability. But the transmission of information is not the only purpose of the Bible. Yes, the psalms do intend to teach theology (see below), but they also arouse the readers' emotions, stimulate their imagination, and appeal to their will. For these purposes, poetry is most effective.

The commentary itself concentrates on the meaning of the psalm and its theological message within the canon as a whole. Thus, we will not engage in specifically prosodic analysis; only rarely, for instance, will we explicitly mention how the parts of a parallel line develop according to A, what's more, B. Even so, such analysis lies behind our presentation of the meaning and theology of the psalms, and knowledge of these conventions will help readers not only to understand our interpretation, but also will allow them to analyse the individual poems more carefully.

6. The theology of the book of Psalms

What does the book of Psalms teach us about God and our relationship with him? C. S. Lewis once commented that ‘the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons’ (Lewis 1961: 10). We may agree with Lewis, while also admitting that, though not ‘doctrinal treatises’, the Psalms do teach doctrine. Indeed, as the fourth-century theologian Athanasius pointed out, the Psalms are ‘an epitome of the whole Scriptures’. Basil, Bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century, noted that the Psalms were ‘a compendium of all theology’. Martin Luther, the well-known Reformer of the sixteenth century, aptly called the Psalms ‘a little Bible, and the summary of the Old Testament’ (quoted by J. Anderson 1981: vi).

As we read the Psalms, we hear of God as Creator, Redeemer, Protector, Sustainer, Provider, Guide, and more. The predominant means of speaking about God in the Psalms is through metaphor and simile (see above). Thus, we hear that God is our Shepherd, our King, our Warrior, our mother, our Father, our Teacher, our Judge, and more. We will explore these facets of God’s character and our relationship with him as we look at the various psalms. The psalms, as we will see, are a verbal portrait gallery of God, in that many of them provide us with a striking picture of God. While none of these pictures is complete in itself, and indeed all of them together do not give us a comprehensive picture of God, they do provide true glimpses of the nature of our God and our relationship with him.

As Christian readers of the book, we must also attend to what Jesus tells his followers in Luke 24. This chapter describes what Jesus said and did during the brief period of time between the resurrection and ascension. He is upset that the disciples did not understand that he, as Messiah, had to suffer before he entered his glory. After all, he reminded them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms’ (Luke 24:44; see also v. 27). While Psalms here stands for the entire third part of the Hebrew canon, the Ketubim [Writings], it does include the book of Psalms itself.

In other words, Jesus is saying that ‘all the Scriptures’ (vv. 27, 45) refer to him, not just a handful of passages. When it comes to the book of Psalms, it is not just a few psalms, often quoted in the New Testament (Pss 2, 16, 22, 69, 110, 118), but all the psalms that anticipate his coming.

We are not alone in pressing towards a Christological reading of the book of

Psalms. The following are examples from recent interpreters:

It seems as though the writers of the New Testament are not attempting to identify and limit the psalms that prefigure Christ but rather are assuming that the Psalter as a whole has Jesus Christ in view and that this should be the normative way of interpreting the psalms.

(Waltke 2013: 62)

Here is the challenge for those who take the New Testament seriously: try singing those Psalms Christologically, thinking of Jesus as their ultimate fulfillment. See how they sound, what they do, where they take you.

(Wright 2013: 15)

The Psalter is the prayer book of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word.

(Bonhoeffer 1954: 46)

This is not to say that the psalms are prophetic. All the psalms, even those cited often in the New Testament, had a setting in their Old Testament context, and that will be the focus of the following commentary. However, it is also important for Christians to read the psalm as anticipating Christ, and we will so reflect on the psalm as part of the *Meaning* section of our commentary.

We have found certain reading practices conducive to discern the Christological significance of a psalm. That is not to say that they are always relevant to a particular psalm, but they are often helpful.

The first practice is to read the psalm as a prayer to Christ. As New Testament believers, we may sing psalms to our Saviour. We may offer him our praise, our laments, our trust, our doubts and our meditations, as we read, pray and sing the Psalms. After all, Jesus is the Son of God. The Psalms are offered to God and, as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus is the appropriate object of our praise and laments.

The author of Hebrews sets the pattern. In the first chapter where he cites a number of Old Testament passages to show Christ's superiority to the angels, he cites Psalm 102:25–27 in reference to Jesus (see Heb. 1:8):

In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.

You will roll them up like a robe;
like a garment they will be changed.

But you remain the same,
and your years will never end.

(Heb. 1:10–12)

In its Old Testament context, this psalm was sung to God. From a New Testament perspective, it is correctly sung to Jesus on the grounds that, while fully human, Jesus is fully God and worthy of divine praise.

The second reason for singing psalms in praise of Jesus is his relationship to the original singer. As we have observed, the speaker in many of the psalms is the Davidic king. Further, the Davidic king is often the focus of a psalm.

A second practice is to sing a psalm as a prayer of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus himself used psalms on occasion in his own prayer. Perhaps the most notable example is his use of Psalm 22:1: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’, as he hung on the cross (see Matt. 27:46). Indeed, the laments, as we will see, often articulate the suffering of Jesus, while the hymns celebrate his glorification.

Thirdly, psalms often present pictures of God, which find their ultimate expression in Jesus. Christians reading about God as shepherd will find their minds drawn to Jesus who is the good shepherd (John 10:11). Psalms concerning God’s kingship lead to reflections on Jesus as the Messiah, or anointed King, as do psalmic reflections on the human king (see Ps. 2). God as a Warrior turns our attention to Jesus who wages war against the spiritual powers and authorities by his death on the cross. These and other Christological connections will be explored in the commentary.

7. The Psalms as a mirror of the soul

Earlier, we noted that, although the psalms were written in response to specific historical events, they were composed in a way that allowed later users to pray the psalm for similar, though not necessarily identical, situations. We have also observed that the primary use of the psalms was in the corporate worship of Israel, although a secondary use was in what today we would call private devotions.

An important implication of this observation is that the later reader of a psalm should identify with the psalmist's voice, usually expressed in the first person. In other words, the reader becomes the 'I' of the psalm. Since the psalms express every emotion known to human experience, there is, in the words of David Hubbard, 'a psalm for every season of life' (Hubbard, 1973).

John Calvin recognized this feature of the psalms when he spoke of them as providing a mirror of the soul:

What various and resplendent riches are contained in this treasure, it were difficult to find words to describe...I have been wont to call this book not inappropriately, an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.
(quoted in Lockyer, 1984)

One looks into a physical mirror to see how one is doing on the outside; when one reads a psalm like a mirror, identifying with the psalmist, then one discovers how one is doing on the inside. Are we moving towards God or away from him? Even when a psalm expresses an emotion that does not reflect where we are emotionally or spiritually, the experience still helps us understand ourselves better. Through reading the Psalms, we come to understand our thoughts and feelings better.

But the Psalms do more than help us articulate our feelings. They also minister to us, as the laments in particular illustrate. As we noted above, laments are songs we sing when life is troubled. They begin with an expression of anguish, as we can see in the first verse of Psalm 130: 'Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD.' However, the psalm turns at the end from distress to hope, so if we pray through the psalm, it moves us from our preoccupation with our troubles to a patient hope for the future.

Excursus: Imprecations

The Psalms express every emotion known to human experience (Allender and Longman, 1994; Pemberton, 2012; Cohen, 2013), even hate. For Christian readers today, the imprecations (or curses) are among the most troublesome features of the book of Psalms. Imprecations are found in some, not all, laments. There are no psalms that are only imprecatory, although the imprecation dominates Psalm 109 (vv. 6–15):

Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy;
let an accuser stand at his right hand.
When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
and may his prayers condemn him.
May his days be few;
may another take his place of leadership.
May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow.
May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven from their ruined homes.
May a creditor seize all he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his labour.
May no one extend kindness to him
or take pity on his fatherless children.
May his descendants be cut off,
their names blotted out from the next generation.
May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD;
may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.
May their sins always remain before the LORD,
that he may blot out their name from the earth.

What are we to make of the imprecations? Are they the sinful expressions of angry human beings never to be repeated by God's people, especially living in the light of Christ's redeeming love? Should they be excised from our prayers and from the liturgy of the church?

In our opinion, such a move would be a grave mistake. As we have just discussed, the Psalms mirror every human emotion and help us articulate them in prayer to God. God invites our honest prayers. When we are deeply harmed and our anger boils, it would be both fruitless (God reads our hearts) and dangerous to suppress those emotions rather than turning them over to God.

And that is the important point: the imprecations are not just expressions of anger; they allow us to turn our anger over to God for him to act as he sees fit. These prayers do not ask God for the resources and opportunity to take vengeance on our enemies; they ask God to do so and acknowledge his freedom

to act or not act as he sees fit. In this way, the imprecations conform to the advice that Paul gives to his readers: 'Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord' (Rom. 12:17–19; Firth, 2005).

8. Worship

While the Psalms are a mirror of the soul and help us articulate and grapple with the emotions that we experience, Wright correctly reminds us:

Good liturgy, whether formal or informal, ought never to be simply a corporate emoting session, however ‘Christian’, but a fresh and awed attempt to inhabit the great unceasing liturgy which is going on all the time in the heavenly realms. (That’s what those great chapters, Revelation 4 and 5, are all about.) The Psalms offer us a way of joining in a chorus of praise and prayer which has been going on for millennia, and across all cultures.

(Wright 2013: 3)

As we have said more than once by now, the Psalms’ primary use during the Old Testament period was as the hymnbook of the people of God. Indeed, if we study the imperatives directed to the congregation of the Psalms and follow the affirmations of the composers, we can see that the psalmists urge us towards a participatory and enthusiastic worship. The following are just a handful of examples:

But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them sing for joy.

(5:11a)

I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness;
I will sing the praises of the name of the LORD Most High.

(7:17)

Be exalted in your strength, LORD;
we will sing and praise your might.

(21:13)

Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.

(47:1)

Let them praise his name with dancing
and make music to him with tambourine and harp.

(149:3)

9. How to read this commentary

Each psalm will be treated under three headings: *Context*, *Comment* and *Meaning*. *Context* addresses the psalm as a whole. Since it is our opinion that the book of Psalms has no systematic and overarching structure (see above), each psalm is treated separately from its immediate context. The emphasis in this section is to identify the type of psalm and describe its major theme(s). Except for the so-called historical titles, the titles to the psalms have been treated in the Introduction. The *Comment* section interprets the psalm section by section in its Old Testament setting. Finally, the *Meaning* section summarizes the overall message of the psalm and then typically concludes with a reflection on the significance of the psalm from a New Testament perspective. Here we will note and discuss any New Testament citation of a psalm and also provide a Christological reading (see above).

COMMENTARY BOOK 1: PSALMS

1 – 41

Psalm 1. The way of the righteous

Context

Psalm 1 serves, along with Psalm 2, as the first part of a two-part introduction to the Psalter. Its placement is intentional on the part of the editors responsible for the final form of the book. Its focus is Torah obedience, and it differentiates those who *delight* in the law and those who are wicked. The reader naturally identifies with one or the other, with the subtle message that those who are wicked should go no further into the literary sanctuary of the Psalms. After all, like the physical sanctuary, the literary sanctuary presumes an intimacy with God that only the righteous can experience. Psalm 1 stands like a Levitical gatekeeper, warning the wicked to proceed no further.^[10] Brueggemann is correct when he points out that Psalm 1's initial position demonstrates that 'the prayers of the Psalter are grounded in and depend upon torah piety and obedience' (Brueggemann 1995: 63).

The psalm employs the concepts, themes and terminology of wisdom literature and thus is rightly understood as a wisdom poem. Most notably, like the book of Proverbs, it makes a strict delineation between the righteous and the wicked, connecting the former with great blessings and the latter with dire consequences. For more on the significance of Psalm 1 as the introductory psalm of the collection, see Introduction: Organization, p. 35.

The psalm has three stanzas. The first describes the blessings that come on those who are righteous (vv. 1–3), while the second presents the contrasting destiny of the wicked (vv. 4–7). The final stanza provides a summary statement concerning both the righteous and the wicked (v. 6).

Comment

1:1–3. Blessing on the righteous

The psalm opens with a tricolon that pronounces blessing on people who

distance themselves from evil. As is typical of parallelism, each colon adds to the thought of the first colon (A, what's more, B, what's more, C; see Introduction: Parallelism). The first colon describes *one who does not walk in step with the wicked*. To *walk* with someone is to be associated with them, but not as deeply as to stand with them (colon 2) or *sit* with them (colon 3). Each colon intensifies the relationship with evil and also uses more forceful terms for evil (*wicked, sinners, mockers*). Mockers are the most egregiously evil people, since they not only sin, but they also turn around and mock the innocent.^[11]

The psalmist pronounces those who avoid such evil associations as *blessed*. The Hebrew term used by the psalmist ('šr) 'stesses a state of happiness' and is not to be treated as a strict synonym for another word often translated 'blessed' (*brk*), which 'speaks more of being empowered or favored as the recipient of blessing from the Lord' (*NIDOTTE* 2: 763). That said, the two words might overlap, in that one who is blessed (*brk*) may respond by being happy ('šr). In Psalm 1, the one who obeys God's covenantal law is happy; in Deuteronomy 28, covenant obedience leads to blessing (*habbērākôt*; 28:2).

God created Adam and Eve in a blessed condition (Gen. 1:28), which they forfeited in their rebellion. It is God's intention to redeem his human creatures and to return them to a condition of blessing (Gen 12:1–3). To understand what it means to be blessed, we can turn to a passage like Deuteronomy 27 – 28, which describes the blessings that will come on an obedient Israel. The assumption is a harmonious relationship between those who are blessed and God that presupposes obedience to God's commands (see Deut. 28:1–2). The ramification of a healthy restored relationship with God will be good relationships with other human beings as well as with creation itself. In other words, it will be a return to Eden-like conditions.

While verse 1 states the negative requirements for righteousness and its resultant blessing (avoidance of evil), verse 2 gives the positive description. The righteous who are blessed *delight...in the law of the LORD*. There is some ambiguity as to what is meant by law (*torah*) here. It could be the Ten Commandments and the 613 laws^[12] that follow them. It could be the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. It could be the book of Deuteronomy (Block, 2011). Based on Deuteronomy 27 – 28 where blessing is contingent on following the covenant law, it seems best to understand that the reference is to delight in obedience to divine requirements.

Verse 3 then metaphorically depicts the vibrant condition of the person who avoids evil and embraces righteous obedience. They will be *like a tree planted by streams of water*. To unpack this figure (technically a simile), the picture suggests life, productivity, fruitfulness, health. The final colon (*whatever they do*

prosper) breaks out of the image and states that just as a well-watered tree produces fruit, so will the righteous person. One thinks of Joseph, whose very presence in the household of Potiphar or later in the Egyptian prison caused those places to be fruitful, because God was with him (Gen. 39:2–3, 21–23).

1:4–5. *Punishment on the wicked*

Verse 4 abruptly turns from the rewards of righteousness to the punishment on the wicked (*Not so the wicked!*). While the righteous are a well-watered tree, the wicked are like *chaff*. Chaff is the opposite of a tree. While a tree has an abundance of life-giving water, chaff is dry. The tree is deep-rooted and productive; chaff has no connection to the earth, but rolls as the wind blows it, and is useless.

As a result, the wicked will not survive God's *judgment*. It is unclear precisely what is meant by judgment here. In its Old Testament context, it may simply refer to the moment in this life when God brings consequences on people for their wicked actions. After all, the full-blown teaching on the afterlife comes only with clarity in the New Testament.¹³ However, it may be that Psalm 1 was not only placed in its initial position in the Psalter during the post-exilic period, but was written at that time as well. If so, late Old Testament as well as some Second Temple Jews did have a more sophisticated understanding of the afterlife. The second colon (*nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous*) does not settle this question, but does make clear that God will not confuse the righteous with the wicked and that each will eventually receive their proper due. It also indicates that the wicked will not stand in the congregation, which is the setting for the use of the Psalms in worship.

1:7–8. *The two ways*

Wisdom literature recognizes that everyone is walking on a path or way. That way is either the way of wisdom and righteousness that is straight, well lit, smooth and leads to life, or it is crooked and filled with obstacles and leads to death. The positive side of the psalmist's statement here is similar to the idea of Proverbs 3:5–6:

Trust in Yahweh with all your heart,
and don't depend on your own understanding.
In all your paths, know him
and he will keep your paths straight.¹⁴

The fact that the Lord watches over the righteous means that they will be safe, while the psalmist concludes with the warning that the way of the wicked ends in

destruction.

Meaning

Psalm 1 introduces the Psalter by contrasting the righteous and the wicked. The righteous are those who delight in God's law and thus spend considerable time studying it. The righteous will prosper, while the wicked will perish. Jeremiah 17:5–8 utilizes the same imagery of the flourishing tree to describe the person who trusts in God.

Brueggemann highlights the significance of Psalm 1 as the opening poem when he observes, 'Standing at the beginning of the Psalter, this psalm intends that all the psalms should be read through the prism of torah obedience' (Brueggemann 1995: 190). The psalm calls the faithful to obedience.

New Testament readers recognize Jesus as the only righteous person without exception. He follows his Father's will perfectly, even though ultimately it takes him to the cross.

Psalm 2. The Lord and his anointed

Context

Psalm 2, along with Psalm 1, serves as an introduction to the book of Psalms as a whole. Psalm 1 cites Torah obedience as a prerequisite to entry into the literary sanctuary of the book. Psalm 2 presents the entrant with a powerful depiction of God and his anointed's strength over against the plotting of the earth's powerful leaders.

The psalm is obviously a kingship psalm, speaking of the divine King as well as his anointed, the designated human king. In its Old Testament context, Psalm 2 likely functioned as a psalm that accompanied the inauguration of the divinely appointed Davidic heir who occupied the throne in Jerusalem. As part of the ceremony, he was anointed, that is, the priest would pour oil on his head in a ceremony that symbolized his divine authorization and empowerment for his office. While it is true that the majority of Davidic rulers did not live up to the standard that God had set for them (see Deut. 17:14–20), they all would have relished the idea that they ruled with the Lord's imprimatur and would have encouraged the use of this psalm during their inauguration, no matter how hypocritical it might have been in terms of their own hearts and actions. After all, God promised his beloved servant David, 'Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever' (2 Sam. 7:16). This Davidic covenant provides the theological background to Psalm 2.

The faithful would probably have seen through the hypocrisy during the monarchical period. But it would have been particularly in the post-exilic period, when the book of Psalms reached its final form, that the eschatological significance of Psalm 2 would have come to the fore. Once the monarchy had ended with Zedekiah and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BC, then questions would have arisen in regard to the promise of the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7. The faithful came to believe that there was a deeper meaning to the promise than having a king sitting on the throne in Jerusalem. They began to expect a future Messiah (from the Hebrew word for *anointed*). The New Testament, of course, recognizes that Jesus is that expected Messiah and affirms that belief every time he is called Christ (the Greek equivalent to Messiah; see also Rom. 1:3–4). For this reason, Psalm 2 is frequently cited in the New Testament (see *Meaning* for specific

citations).

Psalm 2 does not name an author, but the New Testament associates the psalm with David (Acts 4:25), in line with the general tendency during this time to associate more and more psalms with David.

The psalm may be divided into four three-verse stanzas. The first (vv. 1–3) describes the revolt of the kings of the earth. The second (vv. 4–6) describes God’s response to their foolish actions. The third announces God’s decree concerning his appointed king, while the fourth (vv. 10–12) returns attention to the rebellious kings of the earth, by admonishing them to submit and be obedient to the Lord and his chosen king.

Comment

2:1–3. Human rebellion

The psalmist uses three tightly constructed parallel lines¹⁵ to describe the rebellion of the peoples of the earth, led by their kings. They direct their rebellion against the *LORD* and his *anointed* king (or messiah). A king was anointed with oil, probably by the high priest (2 Kgs 11:12). In their relationship with God and the king, the people view themselves as prisoners or slaves (bound by *shackles*). They resist their authority and lead the nations of the world in rebellion against this supposed bondage. The opening parallel line already strongly hints at the futility of their actions when it questions the purpose of their evil plotting and in the second colon reveals that it is *in vain*. Right from the start, we learn that they will not succeed, in spite of all their noisy turmoil.

2:4–6. Divine ridicule

God responds by ridiculing their futile actions. They may be human kings and powerful in their own way, but they are nothing to the divine King who is *enthroned in heaven*. His ridicule leads to angry rebuke. Interestingly, God’s rebuke takes the form of announcing the installation of the human king on the throne in Jerusalem. As mentioned in the Introduction, this psalm almost certainly was used during the monarchical period as a song that accompanied the installation ceremony of the son of David who assumed the throne after the death of his father. Perhaps *Zion* is mentioned because it was the actual physical location of the ceremony. The psalm asserts that the mere existence of this Davidic king would bring terror to the raving human kings of the nations and thus reassert order.

2:7–9. *You are my son*

The third stanza develops God's relationship with his appointed human king who rules from Zion. Verse 7a assumes that the psalm's composer is none other than the king himself, who announces that he will pronounce the *decree* which God addressed to him. Although the psalm does not have a title, as we saw in the Introduction, by the time of the New Testament it was attributed to David, probably on the logic of this verse.

The decree begins with an allusion to 2 Samuel 7:14, the heart of the Davidic covenant, wherein God announces a special relationship with David and his descendants. He there establishes the Davidic dynasty and a special relationship between himself and the king as a *father* to a *son*. In 2 Samuel 7, that father-son relationship is described as one that would punish infractions of the father's rules (2 Sam. 7:14b), but also refers to the fact that he would never remove his kingly son's special relationship (2 Sam. 7:15).

A father grants the requests of his son, and here God invites his kingly son to ask him for dominance over the nations of the world. God signifies that he would bring the nations into submission through the agency of his warrior king.

2:10–12. *Kiss his son*

The fourth stanza again focuses on the kings of the earth. From heaven, God warns them to serve him and to submit to his divinely appointed human king. Not only should Israel and its rulers pay homage to the Lord, but all the kings of the earth should do so. The claim of the psalmist is that the Lord is not a mere local deity, but the God of the whole earth. They should approach God with fear, the attitude that the wisdom literature urges on all of God's people (see especially Prov. 1:7). Fear implies that God is the centre of all existence and power, and that human beings, even kings who are powerful on a human level, are not. Rather, they are dependent on God for everything.

God rules all (v. 11), but he has also established his human representative on the throne in Jerusalem. Because of God's appointment, the kings of the earth also owe obeisance, ritually represented by a *kiss*, to this king.^[16] They should fear him because the power of God is with him. Angering him is dangerous, because his wrath triggers dire consequences (*your destruction*). On the positive side, though, those who submit (*take refuge in him*) will experience blessings. Blessing is associated with an Eden-like existence that includes harmonious relationship with God and humanity, as well as material well-being.^[17]

Meaning

Psalm 2 celebrates God's power over the wicked plots of the kings of the world. Even more, it celebrates God's human agent, the anointed king, whom God had appointed as an agent of order in a disordered world. The psalm cites the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7, in which God grants to David a dynasty. It is thus David in particular and his descendants ruling from Jerusalem who are in mind here, and so it is probable that this psalm functioned as an inauguration song during the period of the monarchy.

However, the books of Samuel and Kings indicate that the hopes of the psalm (and the Davidic covenant) for a pious and effective royal agent of God's will on the earth and the submission of the world's kings with their evil intentions as envisioned by Psalm 2 surfaced only occasionally during the history of Israel and Judah. Indeed, the testimony of these historical books is that the kings were largely responsible for Israel's degradation of faith, as well as the end of the monarchy and Israel's national independence.

For these reasons, the New Testament authors recognized a deeper significance to the psalm that found its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, the greater son of David. Jesus is the Lord's anointed (Messiah) and son of David, a role announced every time he is called Christ (the Greek equivalent to Messiah). At his baptism, God's heavenly voice alludes to Psalm 2:7 by announcing to Jesus: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11; see Matt. 3:17; Luke 3:22). Paul explicitly cites Psalm 2:7 in his sermon at Pisidian Antioch to witness to his belief that Jesus is the ultimate fulfilment of the promise that God's anointed would be his Son (Acts 13:33). The author of Hebrews similarly cites both Psalm 2:7 as well as 2 Samuel 7:14 (1 Chr. 17:13) to underline that Jesus, God's Son, is superior to the angels (Heb. 1:5; 5:5).

Early church leaders recognized Herod, Pontius Pilate and other Gentile and Israelite leaders who executed Jesus and persecuted the early church as the raging rulers of the earth mentioned in the first stanza of Psalm 2, but they were also aware that the Lord in heaven was sovereign and in control of the situation (Acts 4:23–31; Ps. 2:1–2 quoted in vv. 25b–26), and thus they confidently continued preaching the gospel.

The book of Revelation utilizes Psalm 2, and in particular verse 9 (*You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery*), in reference to Christ's second coming and final victory over the forces of human and spiritual evil (Rev. 12:5). In Revelation 19:11–16, Jesus appears riding a white horse and 'coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron sceptre" ' (v. 15, citing Ps. 2:9).

Thus, New Testament readers recognized that Jesus was their anointed King

and the Warrior who would defeat the evil spiritual and human forces ranged against them.

Psalm 3. How many are my foes!

Context

Psalms 1 and 2 serve as an introduction to the book as a whole, so in a sense Psalm 3 is the first prayer after the preamble. The psalm expresses confidence in the midst of turmoil. Since it is a psalm appropriate for a period of disorientation, it is best titled a lament, though the tone of trust is strong.

This psalm is the first with a title. It names David as its composer and situates the psalm at the time when Absalom, his son, led a rebellion against him. The story of Absalom, found in 2 Samuel 13:23 – 17:29, recounts how David fled Jerusalem at the time of Absalom's rebellion. Although the psalm's content and attitude are perfectly appropriate for the time, at least according to the portrait of David in the historical books, the purpose of the psalm is not to memorialize the event, but to provide a model for those who find themselves in similar, though not necessarily identical, situations.

Comment

3:1–2. Many are my foes

The psalmist turns to God in the face of overwhelming opposition. These *foes* are attacking him, and he is feeling bereft of divine help. He cites their claim that God is unable to aid him against them. While the tone and content of the psalm fit perfectly with the historical event named in the title (see *Context*), the psalm is an appropriate prayer for anyone facing overwhelming odds.

3:3–6. The Lord sustains me

The foes have questioned God's willingness and ability to help the psalmist, but in this section, he expresses his confidence in God. He affirms that God is his *shield*, that is, his protection against attack. He is a shield *around* him; thus, unlike a typical shield, God protects him from attack on every side. While shield is a very concrete metaphor, the claim that he is the psalmist's *glory* is less so. God's glory refers to his overwhelming presence. The Hebrew word *kābôd* (glory) at its most basic level means 'heavy', but denotes substance. God's glory impresses the faithful and destroys the wicked, as Pharaoh discovered at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:4, 17–19; Longman 2010: 47–78). Since God protects the

psalmist from his attacking enemies, he *lifts his head high* – not an idiom of pride but rather of confidence.

According to verse 4, he is confident that God will hear his prayer and answer him *from his holy mountain*, which of course is a reference to Zion on which the temple stood. Indeed, he calls out to him now in the face of numerous foes, yet he can sleep because he knows God will take care of him. Thus, the number of his enemies (*though tens of thousands*) makes no difference, since it is the all-powerful God who takes care of him.

3:7. *Arise, Lord!*

It is on the basis of this confidence that the psalmist calls on God to *arise*, an expression that identifies the psalm as a pre-battle song in its original setting (see 7:6; 9:19; 10:12; 17:13; 74:22, etc.). That is, the psalmist calls on God to rise up as Warrior and protect him against his enemies' assault. The second parallelism in verse 7 is a mini-imprecation (see Introduction, pp. 51–52), calling on God to hurt the enemies (following the NIV which treats the verbs as precativ perfects [contra, for instance, the NRSV]). They want to hurt him, but he prays that God will hurt them.

3:8. *Deliverance comes from the Lord*

The psalmist ends with a statement of faith in God as his deliverer, as well as a wish for God's *blessing* (from *brk*; see discussion at 1:1–3) on the people. Since the title names David as the composer, the wish in its original setting is directed towards Israel. According to the list of blessings in texts like Deuteronomy 27 – 28, blessing implies a harmonious relationship with God, humanity and creation itself.

Meaning

The psalmist expresses trust in God at a moment of extreme duress, in particular the onslaught of enemies who want to do away with him. The historical title situates the poem in the life of David, when Absalom and his supporters deposed David from the throne. The psalm was written in such a way that others in similar situations, particularly in battle, could use the prayer as their own. Reardon provides a literary context for this prayer, as he insightfully points out that 'this warfare has to do with the themes already inaugurated in the two preceding psalms – God's Wisdom against wickedness, and the Messiah against ungodly mutiny in Psalm 2. The first tells us that the Psalter's battle is moral; the second tells us that it is theological' (Reardon 2000: 6). New Testament readers

can see Jesus as the ultimate example of such trust in the midst of trouble, as he faced his executioners with full confidence in the Lord.

Psalm 4. An evening prayer

Context

This psalm is a lament and opens with an appeal to God to hear the psalmist's prayer and to remedy his distress (v. 1). The source of his troubles are unnamed enemies whom he upbraids (v. 2), warns (v. 3) and instructs (vv. 4–5). Verses 6–7 focus again on God, appealing to him to bring prosperity and joy not only to the psalmist but to the *many*. The psalm is known as an evening prayer, because the final verse (8) proclaims that, in spite of the distress, the psalmist can go to sleep in peace, knowing that God cares for him.

The title names David as the composer of this psalm. David was often in distress over those who sought to undermine him (Saul and Absalom, to name two). Reading the psalm as a prayer of David would identify the *many* (v. 6) as his followers or subjects.

For the other elements of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

4:1. *Have mercy on me*

The psalm begins like a typical lament by calling on God to answer prayer. The second parallelism of the verse cites *distress* from which relief is sought, but, as is typical in the Psalms, the specific nature of the distress is not delineated, so the prayer may serve as a model for later worshippers experiencing distress that is similar, though not identical, to the composer's. The next sections, though, reveal that the psalmist's distress is caused at least in part by his foes.

4:2–3. *Glory into shame*

The psalmist continues the lament by asking *How long?* – a question found in a number of prayers (6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84). The phrase indicates that the sufferer has been long in his pain and sees no terminus in sight. He thus appeals to God's pity, suggesting that perhaps 'enough is enough'. The psalmist asks his opponents how long they will turn his *glory* into *shame*. Here he might refer to his own glory, his good reputation that the enemies have been seeking to undermine. The title names David as the composer, and there are good examples from the historical books of

those who sought to undermine his reputation, such as Absalom (2 Sam. 15). Or perhaps God himself is the psalmist's glory, and the foes are seeking to undermine God's authority. In support of the latter is the second parallelism in verse 2 that accuses the foes of worshipping *false gods*,^[18] which the psalmist suggests is delusional. By worshipping false gods, they would turn God's glory into shame.

In verse 3, the psalmist warns the enemies that they are troubling the wrong person. The psalmist has God's ear. He names himself as God's faithful servant, in contradistinction to those who serve false Gods. God will hear him and act upon his prayers. Here we see this psalm of lament turning into an expression of confidence that God will rescue him from his distress.

4:4–5. *Do not sin*

In the light of his expectation that God will hear him, the psalmist gives advice to his enemies. He tells them to *tremble*, that is, fear God, and *not sin*. He envisions the foes plotting during the night as they go to sleep, but advises them rather to be self-critical (*search your hearts*) and to remain silent. Paul cites this verse in Ephesians 4:26, but according to the Greek version, 'In your anger do not sin', addressing this instruction to his fellow Christians to guide them in their attitudes towards one another.

The psalmist instructs them not only to refrain from sinful behaviour, but also to act properly towards the Lord. They should not worship false gods, but rather offer *sacrifices* to God and trust in him, as the psalmist himself does.

4:6–7. *Give us prosperity*

The psalmist is not alone in his call for relief from distress. In verse 6, he quotes *many*, whose request for *prosperity* (or simply 'good things') implies that this is lacking at present. That the prosperity includes material things is indicated in verse 7, where the psalmist pleads with God to fill his heart with joy as a consequence of providing them (the many) with *grain* and *new wine*. Verse 6b is the most difficult colon in this section. The NIV, along with many other versions, understands the verb to mean 'lift up' (*nsh*, a biform of *nś*), yielding a literal translation, 'Lift up on us the light of your face', and thus a plea for God to turn his benevolence towards the psalmist and his friends. Others take the verb from 'flee' (*nûs*), and thus believe the psalmist offers a complaint: 'The light of your face has fled from us.' While the latter is not impossible, the former seems more likely, and reflects, using somewhat different terminology, the priestly blessing found in Numbers 6:24–26.^[19]

4:8. I will sleep in peace

Although this is a lament, the psalmist concludes by expressing his confidence in God in the midst of distress. He acknowledges that his security comes only from God, and thus he can sleep well at night.

Meaning

Although the title names David as the composer of this lament, it was written for public use. Those who suffer distress can pray this psalm and turn their anxieties over to God. The psalm expresses confidence in God in the midst of troubles to encourage peaceful sleep.

David's greater Son, Jesus, is an illustration of the attitude expressed in this psalm. Suffering anxiety about his forthcoming trial in Jerusalem, Jesus submits to his Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane and experiences the peace of mind articulated by verse 8.

Psalm 5. A morning prayer

Context

Whereas Psalm 4 is a prayer set in the evening, Psalm 5 identifies itself as a morning prayer (see v. 3). Like Psalm 4, this psalm too is a lament asking for help in the midst of distress brought on by evil people. Both psalms also acknowledge that God takes care of his faithful/righteous people.

Psalm 5 opens with an invocation and plea for help (vv. 1–2), and describes God’s displeasure with the wicked and his love for the righteous (vv. 3–7). The psalmist then calls on God to declare the wicked guilty and to banish them, asking for God’s protection and guidance for the righteous (vv. 8–11). He ends with the confident declaration that God does indeed take care of the righteous in particular by protecting them (v. 12).

The title is similar to that of Psalm 4 (see comments there); the only difference is that this psalm is accompanied by wind instruments (*pipes*) rather than stringed instruments. See Introduction: Titles, p. 30.

Comment

5:1–2. *Consider my plea*

This prayer begins with an invocation and a plea for help. The psalmist swears fealty to his *King* and his *God* as he requests his aid. In verse 1, the psalmist refers to his prayer first with the broad category of *words*, before specifying that his words are a *lament*. The word here translated *lament* (*hāgîq*) is rare, occurring only here and in Psalm 39:3, but with an apparent different nuance of meaning. The NIV suggests that in Psalm 39 the word connotes meditation, while here it is a lament, words uttered in the midst of distress. Verse 2a speaks of his prayer as a *cry for help*. Indeed, as the prayer continues, we note that the psalmist does request aid from God in the midst of his trouble.

5:3–7. *Worship in the sanctuary*

After expressing the psalmist’s desire that God hear his prayer, the next section begins with a statement of confidence that he does. Verse 3 specifies the *morning* as the time when he offers his prayers to God (though some translations believe the verb ‘*rk*’ refers to preparing a sacrifice [REB], rather than laying out his

requests). He can be confident and *wait expectantly* for God to answer his requests because he is not wicked, but rather, he is righteous and can therefore come into God's presence. Indeed, verses 4–6 describe God's animosity towards wicked people. He does not welcome them into his presence because he hates them (v. 5). In particular, the psalmist identifies those who lie and those who want to harm others (*the bloodthirsty*) as the recipients of God's great displeasure (v. 6). The psalmist himself stands in contrast to such evil people, even though he recognizes that his access to God's presence arises because of God's grace (his *great love* [*hesed*], or covenant loving kindness). He comes into the sanctuary and bows down towards the temple, made holy by God's presence. Even though he is far from the temple, Daniel illustrates the practice of bowing towards Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10).

5:8–11. Punishment for the wicked and protection for God's people

Utilizing the common wisdom metaphor of the path as the journey of life, the psalmist asks God to keep him on a straight path, the path of righteousness (*your* [God's] *way*). He asks for this on account of his enemies who want to harm him, and thus implicitly he identifies them as the cause of the anguish that motivates his lament. The mention of his enemies then leads him to another description of their evil. He again highlights their deceitfulness in a way that suggests that he has been a recipient of their lies. But it is not only what they say that is evil. After all, their words are a reflection of their hearts (Prov. 16:23; 18:4), though evil people may misdirect through their speech, since their hearts are 'like a coating of silver dross on earthenware' (Prov. 26:23). When they open their mouths, they speak words that result in death (*Their throat is an open grave*, v. 9). For this reason, the psalmist calls on God to *declare them guilty* (v. 10a). He also asks that their sin (*their intrigues*) backfire and lead to their downfall, rather than the downfall of those they plot against (v. 10b). He further calls on God to *banish them*, using a verb (*ndh*) that means 'to force out' and is used elsewhere in reference to the exile from the Promised Land (Neh. 1:9; Jer. 8:3; 24:9; Zeph. 3:19), whose background is found in the covenant threat that rebellion is punishable by expulsion (Deut. 30:4).

In verse 11, the psalmist now expresses his desire concerning God's attitude and actions towards the righteous. They are those who *take refuge* in God in the midst of adversity (v. 11a), and they *love your* [God's] *name* (v. 11d). He asks God to protect them, presumably from the attacks of evil people, with the consequence that they will be happy.

5:12. Bless the righteous

The final verse of the psalm announces the certainty that God has heard the psalmist's prayer. In verse 12a, he states that God blesses the righteous, which of course would include the psalmist himself, and then focuses on one major aspect of God's blessing, namely God's protection. God's favour towards the righteous acts as a *shield* against attacks.

Meaning

Psalm 5 calls on God for help in the midst of a struggle with deceitful and dangerous enemies. The psalmist knows that God detests such people and their actions, and that he protects righteous people like himself. Access to God's presence is the result of God's grace, however (v. 7). The psalmist can rest assured that God will hear his prayer and protect him from his attackers (v. 12).

Paul cites verse 9 as part of a list of Old Testament passages that support his point that 'Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin' (Rom. 3:9; see v. 9 quoted in Rom. 3:13). Paul then goes on to argue that righteousness is not achieved by keeping the law, but by receiving Jesus' atoning sacrifice as an act of faith.

This psalm is a model for God's people when they are assaulted by evildoers. They too can be confident because of God's great love. Indeed, as Paul told the church in Rome, '...in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any other powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:37–39).

Psalm 6. Do not discipline me

Context

Psalm 6 is a lament that calls on God to help in the midst of trouble. The trouble is first identified as a life-threatening illness, and the psalmist accordingly calls on God to heal him. Second, the psalmist speaks of foes who seek to do him evil, and in his prayer the psalmist asks God to defeat and shame them. As is typical of the lament, the psalmist expresses confidence that God will hear and respond to his prayer for help. While this psalm traditionally has been included in the list of penitential psalms (along with Pss 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143), it does not include an explicit acknowledgment of sin (though v. 1 may imply it).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

6:1–3. *How long?*

The lament begins with an appeal to God to refrain from punishing him. The psalmist identifies the source of his troubles as God's *anger*, but never explicitly states why God would be upset with him. The first verse begins with a typical parallelism where the second colon intensifies the thought of the first. His urgent request to God not to *rebuke* him expresses the desire for God not to assault him verbally and, specifically, not critique his behaviour, thus implicitly revealing an awareness that his suffering is the result of some unidentified sin. The second colon carries the thought further by beseeching God not to move beyond verbal accusation to physical action (*do not...discipline me*).

While verse 1 asks God to refrain from a negative attitude and action towards him, the two-part parallelism in verse 2 begs a positive attitude and action from God. First, he asks God to have mercy on him, and then the second colon specifies an action that would flow from that attitude (*heal me*). The request that God would heal him indicates that the motivation for the original composition of the psalm was illness.²⁰ Indeed, verse 2's dual motivation clauses also suggest this. In the first, the psalmist announces that he is *faint*. The verb ('*ml*') means 'weak', but can apply to psychological as well as physical weakness. Here the adjective is used ('*umlal*'). However, the second colon (*my bones are in agony*) makes it clear that physical weakness associated with sickness is in mind, since

one's bones were 'often viewed as the seat of one's physical strength and health (Job 20:11; 21:24; Prov 3:8; Isa 58:11; 66:14; Lam 4:7; Akkadian texts speak of bones burning with fever)' (*NIDOTTE* 3: 500).

Although verse 2 pinpoints physical illness as a problem for the psalmist, verse 3a (*My soul is in deep anguish*) signifies that his physical ailment had psychological consequences. In Hebrew, *soul* (*nepeš*) here indicates one's inner self, which now experiences distress. All of this leads the psalmist to inquire of the Lord: *How long?* The question suggests that the psalmist's trouble has lingered for a length of time and threatens to go on forever. He is being worn down by its continuation and calls on God to end his suffering.

6:4–5. *Save me!*

The psalmist continues to ask God to save him from his distress. He needs God to turn from his negative stance towards him and adopt a positive one that would result in his deliverance (v. 4). He appeals to God on the basis of his *unfailing love* (*hesed*), which can also be understood as loyalty. This loyal love is based on the covenant, where God promises to be his people's God and take care of them when they turn to him.

The psalmist cajoles God to heal him now rather than let him die, on the grounds that a dead person can no longer praise God, thus appealing to God's self-interest. The psalmist's argument makes sense based on the Old Testament saint's limited understanding of the afterlife (Johnston, 2002).

6:6–7. *My tears*

The psalmist shares his deep mental anguish in the midst of his trouble. He is exhausted from his pain. His tears know no end because of his sorrow. The final colon of this section (v. 7b) alerts the reader to a further source of trouble, his *foes*. Again, in keeping with the nature of the psalms which stay historically non-specific to allow repeated use, we do not know the identity of these foes, but the psalmist's attention turns to them in the next and final section.

6:8–10. *The Lord has heard me*

The psalmist addresses his foes and warns them to watch out. He has confidence that God has heard and will act on his mournful prayer. He does not doubt that God will accept his prayer and act against his enemies. The result will be that they will be defeated and will experience *shame* because of their actions against the psalmist.

Meaning

The psalm is a model prayer for those who suffer illness and persecution. Although there is no explicit confession of sin, the psalmist may imply that he has transgressed, since he does see his present distress as a result of God's anger.

The psalm, particularly with its lack of a clear confession of sin, can be read as expressing the types of emotions Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46). He is 'overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death' and asks God to take his cup (of wrath) away from him. He ultimately submits to God's will, which takes him on a collision course with those who want to kill him, but they will ultimately be *overwhelmed with shame* (Ps. 6:10) as the Father hears his Son's *cry for mercy* (Ps. 6:9).

Psalm 7. God battles against evil people

Context

This lament calls on God the Warrior to rescue the psalmist from the vicious attacks of his enemies. While many laments confess sin, here the psalmist proclaims his innocence, as well as his confidence that God will recognize that he does not deserve the treatment he is receiving at the hands of his foes. In addition, he is sure that these enemies will get their deserts unless they relent.

The psalm is attributed to David. One can think of a number of occasions in David's life as described in the historical books when such a prayer would have been fitting. The historical title, though, specifically situates the song in relationship to 'Cush, the Benjaminite', a person otherwise unknown in Scripture.^[21] We can probably associate him with the enemy that evoked the prayer in the first place.

For the rest of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

7:1–2. Save me from the lions

Many laments begin by asking God to take an action towards the psalmist; here the psalmist begins by taking an action in relationship to God. That is, he takes *refuge* in God. God here is seen as a fortress in which one can find safety in the midst of an attack. The psalmist will put his trust in God in the midst of trouble. After taking this action, he calls on God to act positively towards him and rescue him from the harm that his enemies wish to perpetrate against him.

The psalmist likens his enemies to a lion, a powerful and deadly animal that rips up its prey. Such a horrid end is in store for the psalmist unless God chooses to act on the psalmist's prayer and rescue him.

7:3–5. I am innocent

Some laments, like Psalm 6, confess sin, while others, like the present one, deny sin and assert innocence. The implicit message of verses 3–5 is that the psalmist does not deserve the harm that the enemy wants to inflict. He asks God to examine him, by means of a hypothetical sentence.^[22] If the psalmist is guilty, then let his pursuers catch and kill him. If he has betrayed an ally or robbed his

foe, then he deserves whatever negative consequences might come his way. But the psalmist clearly believes in his own innocence, and thus calls on God not to abandon his cause but to save him. He is not afraid to invoke a curse on himself, because he knows he is innocent.

7:6–9. *Arise!*

In response to his enemies' assault and his own innocence, the psalmist calls on God to *arise* in his anger. The call for God to rise/arise marks this psalm as a pre-battle song (see 3:7; 9:19; 10:12; 17:13; 35:2; 74:22, etc.). The third colon of the parallelism of verse 6 varies the call by beseeching God to *awake*. The metaphor of God asleep indicates the psalmist's belief that God has been unresponsive and needs to be prodded into action. The unchallenged evil actions of his enemies are evidence of God's lack of attention.

If God becomes active again, then his people will gather around their divine King-Warrior (v. 7), who will then render judgment from his heavenly throne (*you sit enthroned over them on high*). The psalmist does not fear God's judgment, but rather welcomes it because he is certain that he will be found innocent. He also understands that God is no ordinary judge who depends on testimony and observation of external behaviour; rather, he probes minds and hearts to determine innocence or guilt. Thus, the psalmist calls on God the Judge to put an end to the wicked actions of his enemies and to bring the innocent to a safe place (v. 9).

7:10–13. *God the Warrior*

The psalmist feels secure knowing that God is a Warrior who protects him and attacks the wicked. The reference to God as *shield* is a metaphor of protection. As a shield protects a soldier from the weapons of an enemy, so God deflects the attacks of the psalmist's assailants. God does not save everyone, though, but he does protect those who are virtuous (*upright in heart*). After all, God is a righteous Judge, the One who declares the innocent innocent and the guilty guilty. Verses 12–13 picture God as a Warrior preparing for battle against his enemies.^[23] He sharpens his sword, strings his bow and sets his arrows on fire to attack, and presumably kills his enemies, those who are persecuting his innocent people.

7:14–16. *Trouble that rebounds on the wicked*

Verse 14 describes those who incubate lies. The wicked are like a pregnant woman. They are pregnant with evil, conceive trouble and give birth to lies.^[24]

Verses 15–16 present a classic statement of retribution theology. The wicked are like those who dig a hole but fall into it themselves. They experience the violence that they had intended for others. Proverbs has a strong emphasis on the idea that pain rebounds on the heads of those who try to perpetrate it towards others (see Prov. 1:18). While Job and Ecclesiastes teach that in this life at least retribution theology does not work perfectly, the psalmist and the sage in Proverbs point out that it is often the case. If the psalm finds a background in the sanctuary court (see fn. 13, p. 76), then the psalmist expresses his confidence that the legal process will work itself out (Firth 2005: 26).

7:17. Worship

The psalm concludes with the psalmist's determination to praise God with song. The motivation is God's righteousness which the psalmist has highlighted in the psalm. God vindicates the innocent and judges the wicked, and this deserves praise.

Meaning

The Old Testament testifies to God's activity as a Warrior who fought for Israel against their flesh-and-blood enemies when they were obedient (Deut. 28:1–2, 7). This psalm thus calls on God in such a situation to put down the violent attacks of the wicked.

With Jesus' advent, the time of physical warfare has come to an end, but not the relevance of this prayer for the Christian. The Christian too is engaged in a battle, not against flesh and blood, but 'against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12). The Christian now prays Psalm 7 with this battle in mind, knowing that Jesus contends on their behalf. The Christian also knows that Jesus will come again for a final battle, and thus the psalm can take on an eschatological dimension as his people await his return as a Warrior to render final judgment against all human and spiritual enemies (Rev. 19:11–21).

Psalm 8. God's glory in the heavens

Context

This psalm meditates on the glory of God reflected in his work of creation of the heavens and of humanity, a theme well known from wisdom literature (e.g. Prov. 3:19–20; 8:22–31). Thus, it is best understood as a wisdom psalm. One purpose of the psalm is to express wonder at the exalted place of humanity in God's created order. God has granted men and women dominion over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:28).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

8:1a. How majestic!

The psalm begins and ends (v. 9) with the same exclamation of God's majesty that extends throughout the whole earth, thus forming an *inclusio* that gives the poem a strong sense of closure. This opening and closing proclamation indicates that the psalmist's main purpose is to draw attention to the majesty of God.

The psalm begins with an invocation of the *LORD* (Yahweh) and names him as his people's *Lord* or master. The Lord is his people's sovereign. God's *name* or reputation is *majestic* (*'addîr*), a word that is often used alongside 'glory' (*kābôd*) and denotes that something is excellent or beautiful or splendid. That God's reputation is excellent throughout the earth is a claim that God is more than a local deity, but it is a hyperbolic statement if it is meant to signify the other nations' conscious acknowledgment of Israel's God Yahweh (the Lord). Christians can take this more literally, in that Christianity is a worldwide religion where Jesus is explicitly praised in the nations of the world.

8:1b–4. What is humanity?

Rather than turning to God's acts in history, the psalmist backs up his claim by citing God's work in creating the cosmos and humanity. The argument is that all the people of the earth look into the sky and sense the transcendent. As they marvel at the heavens, the psalmist understands that they are sensing the true God's greatness in his primordial work of creation (Gen. 1).

The psalmist recognizes the *glory* of God in the heavens, which he created.

The word translated *glory* in the NIV is not the main word so translated (*kābôd*), but, like *majestic* (*'addîr*) in verse 1a, it is another closely related term (*hôd*), which is bettered rendered 'beauty' here to maintain the distinction between these words that are often piled up for emphasis. God's creation, here the heavens in particular, reflect the beauty of God who created it (see also Ps. 19:1).

While verse 3 will directly continue the thought of verse 1b, verse 2 takes an unexpected turn as it pits the praise of *children* and *infants* against the tumult of God's foes. While the enemies may seem fearsome, they are defeated by the praise of children, even infants. One gets the idea that the children's voices drown out the ugly cries of those who speak against God. The statement has a military sense to it (and thus the understanding that the children defeat the enemy) due to the use of *stronghold*, a defensive structure, to describe the result of the children's praise.

Verse 3 returns to the subject of God's creation of the heavens, here identified as the *work of your fingers*, the sense being that God is personally and intimately involved. Verse 3b then specifies the creation of the heavens by focusing on the night sky, the *moon* and the *stars*. These heavenly bodies were created on the fourth day of creation (Gen. 1:14–19), along with the sun. The sun is not mentioned in this psalm (but see Ps. 19:4–6), presumably because the psalmist imagines himself gazing at the sky at night.

The splendour of the night sky makes the psalmist wonder about humanity's exalted position in God's created world. By means of a question, he marvels that God not only pays attention to, but actively cares for, men and women. He asks, *what is mankind?* that this is so, and he answers his own question in the next stanza.

8:5–8. A little lower than God

The psalmist proceeds to answer his own question posed in verse 4. The reason why God pays attention to, and cares for, human beings is because of their exalted status within the created order. The NIV translation (*a little lower than the angels*) represents a failure of nerve²⁵ and follows the Septuagint, renowned for unnecessarily tempering shocking texts. The Hebrew word rendered *angels* is *'ēlōhîm*, more naturally translated 'God', as in the NIV footnote (so NRSV). True, *'ēlōhîm* ('gods') is sometimes used for what are 'angels' (Ps. 82) or 'demons' (Exod. 12:12). But here it is much more likely that 'God' is intended. Humans are less than God, to be sure, but they are closer to God than anything else in the created order. After all, according to Genesis 1:27, human beings are created in the image of God. That is, more than any other creature, humans reflect and

represent God. God has crowned humanity, as image-bearer, with glory (and here at last we have *kābôd*) as well as honour (*hādār*, the fourth word in the semantic range with *kābôd*, *’addîr* and *hôd*). God is glorious, and humanity, as created in the image of God, reflects that glory. It is a derivative glory, analogous to the way in which the moon reflects the light of the sun.

According to verse 5, human beings have not only an important status in creation, but also a pivotal function. The psalmist states that humanity is *crowned with glory and honour*, and now we learn that they are rulers over the rest of creation. In Genesis 1:28, God instructs humanity to ‘rule’ (from *rādâ*) over ‘the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground’. In Psalm 8:6, we learn that God made them rulers (hiphil of *māšal*) over *the works of your hands*. Humanity functions as ‘rulers on earth’, subject to the heavenly King. God has made the rest of creation subject to humanity. Of course, the idea is that humanity would be a benevolent ruler who would care for the rest of creation and be good stewards of it, not despots who would exploit their subjects.

Verses 7–8 then enumerate the other creatures who are so subject to humanity. The language reflects Genesis 1 and mentions the creatures that live on the land (*all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild*), in the sea (*fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas*) and in the air (*birds in the sky*).

8:9. How majestic!

The psalm closes with a repetition of verse 1a (see *Comment*).

Meaning

This psalm reminds the reader of humanity’s exalted state in God’s creation. Humans are *a little lower than God*. Psalm 144:3–4 uses similar though not identical language to express awe at God’s careful concern for humanity.

The book of Job parodies Psalm 8.^[26] Job believes his suffering is the result of God’s affliction, in spite of his own integrity. In Job 7:17, he questions the meticulous attention God gives to human beings:

What are humans that you magnify them,
that you set your heart on them?^[27]

However, rather than leading to the psalmist’s expression of grateful awe, Job complains that God’s care is malicious.

You visit them every morning;
you test them all the time.

Will you look away from me?
Will you leave me alone while I swallow my saliva?
If I sinned, what did I do to you, O watcher of humanity?
Why have you made me your target?
Why have I become a burden to you?
Why do you not forgive my transgression
and carry away my guilt?
For I now lie down in the dust.
You will look for me and I will not be there.
(Job 7:18–21)

We turn now to the New Testament, whose authors read the psalm in the light of Christ and connected it with Jesus, the perfect man, who fully reflected the dignity of humanity as created by God.

The Gospel of Matthew describes Jesus citing Psalm 8:2 to the chief priests and the teachers of the law when they admonished him because the children were shouting ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’ after he had removed the money-changers from the temple precincts and healed the blind and the lame. In response, Jesus quoted 8:2 in its Septuagint version (Matt. 21:16). The quote is appropriate, since the children’s praise challenges Jesus’ enemies, although it probably further enraged them because the quote puts Jesus in the place of God, but perhaps they were consciously praising God for the work he was doing through Jesus (Beale and Carson 2007: 69–70).

The New Testament reads Psalm 8 in the light of the coming of Christ. While verses 4–8 speak of the significance of humanity, Paul applies the thought to Jesus, who after all was perfect man as well as God. In 1 Corinthians 15:27, Paul cites 8:6 (perhaps also alluding to Ps. 110:1): he (God) ‘has put everything under his feet’, with particular reference to death, which he defeats by virtue of his resurrection.²⁸

The author of Hebrews uses Psalm 8 as part of his argument that Jesus was more important, and thus more deserving of reverence, than the angels (Heb. 2:5–10). Citing the Septuagint version of Psalm 8, he remarks that Jesus was made a little lower than the angels (rather than ‘God’, which is the best reading of the Hebrew) ‘for a little while’ (see NIV footnote). But now Jesus is crowned with glory and far surpasses whatever glory the angels reflect.

Psalm 9. Arise, O Lord (part 1)

Context

Psalms 9 and 10 were almost certainly a single psalm originally (as in the Septuagint). Together they compose a single acrostic poem, where each successive poetic unit begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 9 presents the first half of the alphabet (letters *aleph* to *kaph*), while Psalm 10 continues with the second half (letters *lamed* to *taw*). In addition, many of the themes and concepts from Psalm 9 are repeated in Psalm 10. The lack of a title at the head of Psalm 10 in a part of the book where titles are the norm is another indication of an original unity.

Of course, this conclusion begs the question as to why the original psalm was split into two separate psalms. Some believe that Psalm 9 is a thanksgiving psalm for a past deliverance, while Psalm 10 is a lament requesting a future rescue. However, while Psalm 9 does reflect back and thank God for past help, it concludes with a call for help in the midst of a present turmoil and thus is itself a lament. Perhaps, though, the thankful opening to Psalm 9 led an editor to make the division.

The title indicates that Psalm 9 (and 10) is a psalm of David, which would certainly explain why the lament of an individual has national scope. The psalmist's enemies are the nations (v. 5), and God's response has *uprooted their cities* (v. 6). The psalm both celebrates past victories of God the Warrior and calls on God to 'arise' to meet a new threat (9:19; 10:12).

Some might question David's authorship of Psalm 9 (and 10) based on the fact that God is *enthroned in Zion* (9:11), taken as a reference to the temple, which, of course, was not built until the time of Solomon (1 Kgs 6). However, we should remember that David anticipated the building of the temple and indeed bought the threshing floor of Araunah and built an altar there, the site of the later temple (1 Chr. 21:18 – 22:1). In fact, he spent considerable time preparing for its construction (1 Chr. 21 – 29). For the other elements of the title, see the Introduction.

In this commentary, we will treat Psalms 9 and 10 as a single psalm, and so the discussion of *Meaning* of both psalms will be found at the end of Psalm 10.

Comment

9:1–2. *Thank you!*

The psalmist opens by expressing his wholehearted gratitude to God, even before telling the reader the reason. As the psalm continues, he will give reasons, but only in the most general terms, so that other worshippers can use his composition as a model prayer for their own specific experience.

As a crucial part of his thanks, the psalmist will recount God's *wonderful deeds* : that is, how God entered his life situation and turned it round for the better. As a result, the psalmist experiences joy and is moved to praise God's name.

9:3–6. *You have rebuked the nations*

This stanza looks back on God's past rescue of the psalmist from the power of his enemies. The language describes a conflict of nations, rather than individuals (i.e. *you have uprooted their cities*), perhaps explained by the fact that the composer, according to the title, is none other than David the king of Israel. That said, the references are purposefully vague, so the later reader cannot identify a specific situation that gave rise to the poem in the first place.

The psalmist recognizes that his enemies' retreat is not because of his own power or strategy, but rather it was caused by God. In the Old Testament, God is often pictured as a Warrior, taking to the battlefield on Israel's behalf and beating back the enemy (Longman and Reid 1995: 31–47). The composer pictures God as a *righteous judge* (a role often connected to the Divine Warrior theme; Longman and Reid 1995: 44, 66) who has vindicated his case (*you have upheld my right and my cause*) and has also served as the one who carries out the sentence against those who have harmed him. They are completely undermined and have been forgotten (vv. 5–6).

9:7–10. *God reigns*

God's past rescue (vv. 2–6) leads the psalmist to reflect on God's kingship. God the Warrior who judges also rules as King. He is a righteous royal Judge over the whole earth (v. 8; see similar idea and language at 96:10; 98:9). As such, he is on the side of the vulnerable (*the oppressed*) and protects them in their distress. Those who go to the Lord for protection will find him to be their *refuge* and *stronghold*. God has a track record in this regard, according to the psalmist, because he has not let down those who have come to him for help (v. 10b), breeding confidence in those who know him (v. 10a).

9:11–12. *God remembers*

His remembrance of God's past acts of rescue and his reflection on God as King, Warrior and Judge lead the psalmist to invite Israel to praise God, *enthroned in Zion*, which is the location of the sanctuary, God's royal residence on earth. Although Israel sings his praise, the word is to go out beyond its borders to the nations, who should learn that they must not attack Israel because when God hears the cries of his suffering people (*the afflicted*) he will take action.²⁹ Verse 12a speaks of God remembering (*zākar*) those who have shed blood in order to avenge the crime, and then in verse 12b the psalmist names what triggers his action: the *cries of the afflicted*, which *he does not ignore* (lit. forget; *šākah*). God does not let evil go unpunished (Nah. 1:2–6).

9:13–14. *Have mercy on me*

Up to this point, the psalmist has spoken of the past when God has responded to the cries of his people and rescued them from their enemies. In this stanza, we learn that the psalmist confronts a present crisis, and he calls on God to help him once again. He draws God's attention to the persecution that his enemies direct at him. He then asks God to adopt a benevolent attitude towards him in the midst of his struggle (*have mercy*) and thus take steps to rescue him. Because of the attack by his enemies, he is now at *the gates of death*, but he asks God to transfer him to *the gates of Daughter Zion* (the mountain in Jerusalem on which sits the sanctuary). Rather than shouting cries for help, he wants to sing God's praises that proclaim God's *salvation*, here denoting God's military victory over his enemies.

9:15–18. *Trouble that rebounds on the wicked*

The composer's call for God to intervene in the present crisis is immediately followed by a statement of confidence that he will do so. Indeed, in verse 15 we hear that the nation's evil actions will rebound on their own heads. They are like those who dig a pit or place a net in order to capture someone, only to fall into the pit or step in the net themselves. This idea of the consequences of an evil act coming on the head of the perpetrator is a common one in the book of Proverbs (e.g. Prov. 1:18–19; also Ps. 7:14–16). However, this punishment is not simply inherent in the sinful act; rather, God sees that they suffer the consequences of their evil deeds (Boström, 1990). So, even though the wicked (identified as the nations that forget God) go down to the realm of the dead, this is seen as an act of divine justice (v. 16a). On the other hand, God will be on the side of his needy people (v. 18).

9:19–20. Arise Lord!

The psalmist closes with a final appeal to God for help. The call for God to arise (v. 19) is indicative of a pre-battle hymn. The psalmist urges God to manifest his superiority to the nations. They are not just attacking Israel; they attack God himself, so God needs to teach them that they are mortal and that he is God.

Meaning

See *Meaning* at the end of Psalm 10.

Psalm 10. Arise, O Lord (part 2)

Context

See the discussion of *Context* for Psalm 9.

Comment

10:1. Where are you, God?

Psalm 10, which is most likely a continuation of Psalm 9 (see *Context*), begins with questions that reveal the psalmist's sense that God is absent from him in the midst of his trials. He takes his struggles as an indication that God has chosen to remove himself from him. The questions are asked not so much to receive an explanation as to prod God into action. God had entered into a covenant with Israel and had promised that he would be with his people, and now the psalmist wants to see God take action on his behalf.

10:2–11. The wicked man

This stanza provides a lengthy description of the *wicked man* (*rāšā'*). The emphasis in verses 2–6 is on his *pride*. Proverbs extensively criticizes pride as a characteristic of the foolish, wicked, godless person, which contrasts with the humility displayed by the wise (e.g. Prov. 3:5, 7; 6:17; 11:2; 15:25, 33). A proud person thinks they are the centre of the universe, not God. As a result, that person demeans God (v. 3b) and promotes the greedy, thus demonstrating that his ethical judgment has been turned upside down. Indeed, he has no time for God (v. 4). The proper attitude towards God is to fear him (Prov. 1:7), but he is indifferent towards him. Consequently, he has nothing to do with the law of God. The wicked person is self-sufficient and feels that he is impregnable (v. 6) in his prosperity (v. 5a). Because of his pride, he preys on the weak (v. 2a), who are his enemies. This characteristic will be developed further in verses 7–11. It is likely that the psalmist considers himself among the weak and thus the enemy of the wicked person.

Verses 7–11 then describe the tremendous harm that the proud person brings on the innocent. These wicked people use deceptive speech as a weapon to harm their enemies, again a theme found in the book of Proverbs (vv. 7–8; cf. Prov. 6:16–19; 10:18; 12:17, 19, 22; 14:5, 25, etc.). They set hidden ambushes for the

innocent (see Prov. 1:8–19). Worst of all, they believe that God is oblivious to their crimes.

10:12–15. *Arise!*

In this stanza, the psalmist turns from a description of the wicked man to an appeal to God to destroy the evildoer. It begins with a call to God to *Arise*, a call that echoes in those psalms that call on God as Warrior to intervene in a crisis (see also Pss 3:7; 7:6; 9:19; 17:13; 74:10–11; 94:2; 132:8). The victims are described as the *helpless* or the *afflicted*. They are vulnerable, but God is the helper of the vulnerable (including the *fatherless*, v. 14). While the wicked man does not think that God will pay any attention (v. 13), the psalmist realizes that his God will not let the wicked pass unscathed. Thus, he calls on God to *break the arm of the wicked man*, indicating that he will break the control of the wicked, and in this way the wicked man will receive proper justice (*call the evildoer to account for his wickedness*). The psalmist simply asks that the wicked receive the retribution they deserve.

10:16–18. *God is King*

Because God is *King*, the nations that seek to destroy him and his people will come to nothing (v. 16). While the wicked person boasts about the cravings (*tā'ăwâ*, v. 3) of his heart, so God hears the desire (*tā'ăwâ*, v. 17) of his afflicted people and will encourage them. God takes care of those who are weak and vulnerable (*the fatherless and the oppressed*), with the result that no mere person will ever again *strike terror* in God's people.

Meaning

The psalmist (of Pss 9 and 10) celebrates God's past victories over the evil nations, while at the same time calling on him to intervene in the midst of a present crisis. The enemy in view is a hostile nation, although the threat leads the psalmist to reflect on the nature of the *wicked man* (10:2–11). While the psalmist believes God is absent at present (10:1), he is confident that he will have the final victory (10:16–18).

Christians today are in the midst of a spiritual battle (Eph. 6:10–20), but they can call on Jesus their Warrior to battle the 'powers and authorities'. They can be confident that Jesus will have the final victory. Jesus himself was killed by wicked men ('with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross', Acts 2:23), but God had the final victory through the resurrection ('it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him', Acts 2:24).

While the psalmist speaks of the wicked man as opposed to the righteous (10:2–11), Paul cites verse 7 along with a number of other passages from Psalms and Isaiah in order to describe the pervasive sinfulness of all humanity (see Rom. 3:9–20). He makes this point in order to emphasize that our salvation is not the result of our own efforts, but rather through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus’, Rom. 3:23–24).

Psalm 11. In the Lord I take refuge

Context

Psalm 11 is best understood as a song of confidence. The psalmist faces significant trouble from violent enemies, but he expresses utter trust in God to protect him, even though his trusted advisors are encouraging him to flee. Although this is a song of confidence, the psalm utilizes the language and concepts of wisdom. The world of wisdom is especially found in the psalmist's distinction between the way of the *upright* (*yāšār*) and the *righteous* (*ṣaddîq*) on the one hand, and the wicked on the other. The former will be blessed with God's presence, while the latter will receive his punishment.

The title is composed of two parts. Consult the Introduction concerning 'For the director of music'. The second part identifies the psalmist as David. In this case, it is helpful to think of David as the original composer, in dialogue with his advisors about a threat to his reign and life (see *Comment* on 11:1–3). That said, the psalm also serves as a model prayer for worshippers who come after David and find themselves tempted to flee from danger and threat.

Comment

11:1–3. When the foundations are being destroyed

The psalmist opens by responding to those who advise him to escape danger. The identity of those (the plural verb *say* indicates that *you* refers to a group, not an individual) who offer this advice is not given, but they seem to have the best interests of the psalmist in mind. They are aware of those who have violent intentions towards the psalmist and want him to escape their plots. The psalm's title names King David as the composer (see Introduction), and thus perhaps those who urge his flight are his political and military advisors. They describe the wicked who are preparing to do battle by readying their bows. Their target is the *upright in heart*, presumably the psalmist himself. To be upright (*yāšār*) is to be legally and ethically right. Job is 'upright' or virtuous (Job 1:1), a quality highly prized in the book of Proverbs (Prov. 1:3; 2:7, 21; 8:6, 9; 11:3, 6; 12:6; 14:11; 15:8; 16:13; 20:11; 21:2, 8; 23:16; 29:10). An upright king would be characterized by justice. The psalmist's advisors end with a rhetorical question that suggests that flight is the only recourse when *the foundations are being*

destroyed. The foundations here are likely those of society, and probably suggest a disintegration of those institutions that maintain social order, protect virtue and fend off evil. To the advisors, in other words, it looks as if the wicked have gained the upper hand and the righteous have no alternative but to leave and seek protection.

Their advice is to *flee like a bird to your mountain*. When a bird is threatened, it does not stand and fight, but quickly flies away from the danger to find safe ground (Ezek. 7:16). The advisors encourage the psalmist to seek refuge in *your mountain*. A mountain provides a good place of defence, placing one higher than the attacking enemy.

The psalmist knows that he is secure, not in a fortress, but rather *in the LORD*. God is the One who will take care of him. He thus reacts to his advisors with disbelief. He is astounded that they would urge him to flee from his enemies.

One can think of a number of occasions in David's life when he is threatened in a way that resonates with the situation described in the psalm. He is beset by Saul early in his life and later by Absalom. It is interesting, considering the bird simile that opens the psalm, that David charges Saul with hunting him 'as one hunts a partridge in the mountains' (1 Sam. 26:20; VanGemeren 2008: 160). Determining a precise historical context, however, is not important. After all, the psalm came to be used by later worshippers who found themselves in similar situations.

11:4–7. The Lord is in his holy temple

In the second part of the psalm, the composer explains why he has such confidence in God in the face of armed attackers. Verse 4a simply states that *God is in his holy temple*. In other words, he has made his presence known among his people. The second colon (v. 4b) sharpens the idea of the first. God is on his *heavenly throne*. The temple is an earthly manifestation of a heavenly reality. The temple's innermost sanctum contained the ark of the covenant, which was considered the footstool of his throne. God was enthroned above the ark. This reflected the heavenly reality that God the King ruled from heaven.

From this heavenly vantage point, he observes everyone (v. 4c–d). He is able to differentiate the righteous from the wicked (v. 5). The psalmist knows that by being one of the righteous he will find God's favour. He will live in the presence of God (*the upright will see his face*, v. 7c). God will, on the other hand, see that the wicked receive the violence they intend for others. On them will rain *fiery coals and burning sulphur*, and they will experience *a scorching wind* (v. 6). Genesis 19:24 describes how God rained burning sulphur on the wicked cities of

Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Hebrew, these punishments are literally called ‘the portion of their cup’ (see NRSV; NKJV), although the NIV says simply *their lot*. While there is a cup of blessing (Ps. 23:5), this cup is one of judgment and God’s wrath, which the wicked will drink (Ps. 75:8).

Meaning

Psalms 11 is a prayer of a righteous person in the midst of persecution. His trust in God as his protection (*refuge*) leads him to express his confidence, rather than to lament his difficult situation. While his advisors urge him to flee the threat, he calmly faces the trouble, knowing that God is with the righteous to help them, while he judges the wicked. Psalms 46 and 48 similarly express confidence in the midst of turmoil because of the presence of God with his people.

Psalm 12. God protects the needy

Context

Psalm 12 has elements of lament as well as confidence, but that should not surprise, since laments typically end with statements of trust or even praise. This lament may be divided into two stanzas. In the first (vv. 1–4), the composer laments the loss of faith and virtue in the human community. He then specifies sins of speech as illustrative of the disintegration of society, calling on God to ‘cut off’ evil speech that tries to oppress others. In the second stanza, the psalmist describes God coming to the aid of the oppressed. Since God’s word is true, he can count on God’s help, even in light of the boastful confidence of evil people.

The psalm is ascribed to David. His story contains those moments when he felt betrayed and oppressed. One thinks of the time when he was driven from Saul’s court, or deposed by his own son Absalom.

For other elements of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

12:1–4. *They are all liars*

This lament begins with an invocation and plea to God for help (*Help, LORD*). The conjunction *for* (*kî*) then introduces the psalmist’s complaint that leads to his lament. He complains that ethical behaviour, particularly that associated with speech, has disappeared from human society. In this section, it sounds as if he alone is left, although in the second part of the psalm he speaks more as a representative of a group (*the poor/needy*, v. 5). He bemoans the loss of those who are *faithful* (NIV), but the Hebrew word here would be better rendered as ‘godly’ (so NRSV). The term is *ḥāsîd*, and is connected to the common word *ḥesed*, which means covenant love or loyalty. His perception is that those who live consistently by the requirements of the covenant are diminishing. The next colon (v. 1b) uses a different term (*’ēmûnîm*) for this same community, which the NIV translates as *loyal*, but it could be ‘faithful’, again in reference to God and his covenant.

Verse 2 specifically identifies those who speak deceptively as the problem. Such people would violate the covenant by breaking the ninth commandment

(‘You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour’, Deut. 5:20). Proverbs devotes much of its teaching to promoting healthy, honest speech over against society-destroying, foolish speech, including gossip, slander, flattery and outright lying (Prov. 6:19; 9:7; 10:18; 11:13, etc.; Longman 2006: 568–572). According to the psalmist, there is a reprehensible lack of harmony between what these people say (*they flatter with their lips*) and what they think (*but harbour deception in their hearts*). In short, they are hypocrites.

In verses 3–4, the psalmist invokes an imprecation against these evil speakers. According to the NIV, he calls for God to *silence* them, but other versions choose the more concrete and vivid translation, with the psalmist calling on God to ‘cut off’ (the verb is *krt*) *all flattering lips and every boastful tongue*. Of course, a literal cutting would lead to a silencing. Verse 4 also reveals that they lie, cheat, flatter and boast in order to dominate others.

12:5–8. You keep all the needy safe

Verse 5 quotes God, to the effect that he will respond to the psalmist’s plea for help. In this part of the poem, the psalmist makes it clear that he represents, or is part of, a group that he identifies as the *poor* or *needy*. They are the down-and-outs of society who experience the oppression of the evil speakers. God responds to their need by saying that he *will arise*. The language is commonly found in laments in which the psalmist calls on God to ‘arise’ or ‘rise up’ (3:7; 7:6; 9:19; 10:12; 17:13; 74:22). These contexts make clear that when God does rise to help his people, he does so as a Warrior. The final colon of verse 5 has been subject to diverse translations on account of the difficulty of the final verb which can have a variety of meanings. The first clause of the colon is literally: ‘I will set in rescue’, which is well represented idiomatically by the NIV’s *I will protect them*. But the rest of the colon is literally: ‘he blows at them’, and this can be understood positively as those whom he will protect, namely those who long for it, presumably taking the blowing as a sigh of hope (so NRSV), or negatively in reference to those from whom he will protect the needy, namely *those who malign them* (NIV). The latter has support from ‘where *pwḥ* is used in the sense of denigration’ (Ps. 10:5; Prov. 29:8; *NIDOTTE* 3: 585).

In contrast to the wicked people of the world who speak falsely, God’s word is *flawless*. It is pure like highly refined precious metals. The implication, of course, is that God’s word can be counted on. The specific reference is to his promise in verse 5 that he will protect the needy from the oppression of wicked people.

The psalmist then ends his lament with a statement of confidence directed

towards God himself. God has said that he will protect the needy and the psalmist confidently affirms the truth of his statement (v. 7). He feels confident, even though appearances suggest that the wicked seem to have free rein, and humanity praises what is vile.

Meaning

The psalm is a model prayer for those experiencing the oppression of others, particularly through their speech, whether boastful, flattering or downright deceptive. The effect of the prayer is to build confidence and to direct the person praying to the reality of God's sovereign protection.

The New Testament reader thinks of Jesus who suffered the verbal assaults and deceptions of those who wanted to harm him. But, like the psalmist, he trusted God and found peace in the midst of turmoil.

Psalm 13. How long, O Lord?

Context

The psalmist feels abandoned by God and prays a lament. The opening stanza repeats the question: *How long?* Asking ‘how long’ rather than ‘why’ implies there is a reason for God’s abandonment, but suggests that perhaps the punishment should have run its course by this time. Thus, the second stanza (vv. 3–4) presses God to change his attitude towards the psalmist, and the third (vv. 5–6) expresses trust in God’s love and sure salvation, and ends in praise.

The title associates the prayer’s composition with David, whose life would have provided many occasions to inspire such a psalm.

For ‘director of music’, see the Introduction.

Comment

13:1–2. *How long, Lord?*

In the first stanza of only two verses, the psalmist four times plaintively cries, *How long?* How long will his anguish last? The question exposes a lack of confidence that the time of sorrow will ever end, but also implies that God should make it stop. After all, the first line of two cola implies that it is God’s decision to let his trouble continue. The first asks whether God will *forget* him forever. To forget in the Hebrew Bible is not a purely cognitive act. To remember is to act positively towards someone; to forget is the opposite: to withhold help and comfort. In the second colon, the psalmist asserts that God has hidden his face from him. He has made himself absent from the life of the psalmist, who desires God to come back into his life. Psalm 30:7 recalls a time past when God hid his face on account of the psalmist’s pride. While no reason is given for why God has hidden his face, perhaps it was because of sin, but now the psalmist feels that the punishment has gone on long enough. If so, the thought is similar to that expressed by the author of Lamentations, who, while recognizing that the destruction of Jerusalem was the result of sin, felt that ‘enough was enough’. Interestingly, Lamentations ends with similar ‘how long’ questions (Lam. 5:20), before requesting God to restore the people to himself.

The second line, also composed of two cola (v. 2), similarly asks two *how long* questions. The first has to do with the psychological effects of God’s

absence. The psalmist's mind is in turmoil and filled with sorrow. He wants it to end, but how long must he wait? The final *how long* question reveals the presence of an enemy, an outside force who seeks to undermine the psalmist. The fact that the psalmist turns to God in regard to his enemy demonstrates that he believes God to be the ultimate cause of his misery. Again, this idea is similar to that found in the book of Lamentations. The author of the latter knew that the immediate cause of the destruction of Jerusalem was the enemy, almost certainly the Babylonians, although they are not specifically named, but ultimately the cause was God, the Divine Warrior. Thus, it is to God, not the enemy, that the appeal to stop is directed.

13:3–4. Give light to my eyes

The series of questions that constitute the first stanza in essence queried God's fairness. The implication of 'how long' is that it has been too long. Now is the time for God to change from absence to presence. Thus, the second stanza not surprisingly requests, or maybe even insists, on a divine response. The option, according to the psalmist, is either divine help or death. If God does not *give light* to his eyes, then his eyes will close with the sleep of death. The psalmist further prods God to beneficent action towards him by saying that if God allows the latter, then his enemy will proclaim triumph. Here, the psalmist reveals his belief that God does not want the enemy to triumph in an ultimate sense. After all, although God will use pagan nations and people to be the agents of his judgment, he does not want them to be victorious in the end.

13:5–6. Confidence and praise

Most laments end with confidence or praise; this one finishes with both. The psalmist's praise emanates from his trust that God will hear his prayer and will respond. After all, God has *unfailing love* (*hesed*), the kind of love that is connected to the covenant relationship between God and Israel and which produces loyalty. God will save or rescue the psalmist. He can be sure of that, because God is good.

Meaning

This psalm provides a model prayer for someone who has felt God's judgment, but now wants to urge him towards restoration. The basis of this prayer is God's justice. He will not punish more than is deserved. The basis of the prayer too is that God does not want the enemy of his people to overwhelm them. The ending of the book of Lamentations asks similar questions on behalf of the whole

nation.

The psalmist's sense of divine abandonment is felt by Jesus on the cross, although he asks the 'why' question, not the 'how long' question (Mark 15:34, citing Ps. 22:1). In any case, the Christian reader of the psalm may find confidence in the fact that Jesus himself experienced abandonment, and hope in the resurrection.

Psalm 14. ‘There is no God’

Context

Psalm 14 is a lament that bemoans the pervasive oppressive presence of wicked people in the land. In its description of the wicked, it utilizes vocabulary and concepts that are familiar to wisdom literature (*fool* in v. 1), as is the strong distinction between the righteous and the wicked. Like many laments, Psalm 14 ends with a note of confident expectation and future praise of God.^[30]

Psalm 14 has its near twin in Psalm 53, the only substantial difference between the two psalms being in 14:5b–6 and 53:5b.

David is said to be the author of the psalm. He speaks of the *fool* or *nābāl* who denies there is a God and acts in a wicked manner. Of course, David dealt with such a fool whose very name means fool. Nabal (the Hebrew word for ‘fool’) dealt brusquely with David and suffered the consequences (1 Sam. 25).

For the rest of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

14:1. *There is no God*

The psalm begins with a reflection on the *fool*. There are many Hebrew words for fool. The psalmist here speaks of the *nābāl*, and while it is not easy to specify the precise meaning of each of these words, Fox is helpful when he comments, ‘a *nābāl* is a species of fool, base and worthless and an object of scorn. He is never merely stupid, but...morally deficient’ (Fox 2000: 627). And certainly the latter characteristic is brought out in the second parallel line of the first verse, when the fool is described in terms that express utter depravity. That said, the primary characteristic of fools is that they deny God. Whether or not they are actually atheists is beside the point. As Proverbs famously asserts, ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge’ (1:7), and here we get the flip side of that statement: the rejection of God is the start of folly and moral corruption.

14:2–3. *Do any understand?*

The psalmist has pronounced that humanity is characterized by pervasive depravity. In these verses, he claims God’s agreement in this assessment. He describes God examining humanity from heaven, looking for a righteous person

who is seeking him. Verse 3 announces the results of God's investigation. Rather than seeking him, people are running away from him. No-one is good. While such a categorical statement is surely hyperbolic (after all, the psalmist himself would be one who sought God), God's evaluation reminds us of the situation on the eve of the flood when 'God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways' (Gen. 6:12).

14:4–6. *Oppressing the poor*

The psalmist is amazed at the ignorance of the wicked. They persecute the righteous poor, as if God were not there to protect them and take care of them. Their oppression of God's people is as natural and common *as eating bread*, the staple of the ancient Israelite diet. They ignore God, although he is very present with his people. Rather than fearing God, they dread him.

14:7. *Desiring restoration*

The psalmist has complained that wickedness rules the land. The wicked oppress God's people, which presumably includes him. But he does not end in despair, but rather with a note of hope and confidence. In the first colon of the verse, he expresses his wish for *salvation*. This salvation would mean a rescue of his people from the dangers posed by the corruption of humanity. The reference to *Zion*, of course, points to the Lord whose sanctuary is on that mountain in Jerusalem. The final two cola of the verse reveal that he has no doubt that the day of rescue will come, and when it does, he encourages God's people to celebrate.

Meaning

The psalm describes the wicked *fool* as one who denies God and practises evil. The psalmist opens on the despairing note that humanity is rife with such people. The others, described as *righteous* (v. 5b) and *poor* (v. 6a), are those who are the object of the oppression of the wicked. Even so, the psalmist maintains his confidence and hope in God on Zion who will come to rescue him. When that happens, God's people must celebrate.

Paul cites verses 1–3 (in conjunction with Ps. 53:1–3 [see *Context*] and Eccl. 7:20) in Romans 3:10–12, in a string of citations that also include Psalms 5:9; 140:3; 10:7 (Septuagint); Isaiah 59:7–8; and Psalm 36:1 to assert that no-one is righteous, and for that reason no-one can earn their salvation through keeping the law.

Psalm 15. Who can enter the sanctuary?

Context

The psalmist poses a question in verse 1 that he answers in verses 2–5, ending with a concluding statement based on this answer. The statement may be taken as a promise. The form suggests to some a wisdom psalm (VanGemeren 2008: 178), although its connection with the sanctuary and ritual discourages such an association. Even so, as the *Comment* section will demonstrate, the psalm has many thematic and terminological connections with the book of Proverbs. Admittedly, it is hard to fit this psalm into the typical categories of psalms (see Introduction, pp. 38–42). From its content, the psalm has been taken as an entrance liturgy to the sanctuary. It was likely either an actual liturgy performed at the gates of the temple or simply a reminder of the requirements for admittance to the sanctuary (see also Ps. 24:3–6).

Comment

15:1. Who may dwell in your tent?

The psalm opens with a question directed to God concerning who was allowed to enter the sanctuary. During the Old Testament period, God could be encountered only in certain designated holy places, and these places had restricted access. The verbs (*dwell* [gûr] and *live* [šākan]) denote temporary residence. After all, no-one actually lived in the sanctuary; they visited it to have intimate communion with God. In the first colon, the sanctuary is called a *tent*. The NIV adds *sacred* to make clear that readers know it is a reference to the tabernacle. During the period from Moses to David, the tabernacle was the place in which God made his presence known to his people. After he had brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, David pitched the tent on Zion, the *holy mountain* (2 Sam. 6:1–19), on which Solomon later built the temple.

15:2–5b. Blameless and righteous

These verses answer the question posed in verse 1: Who can gain access to the holy place? The answer is: only those who are righteous and act blamelessly. Psalm 1, as we have seen, acts as a gatekeeper to the literary sanctuary of the Psalms, and it warns that ‘the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners

in the assembly of the righteous' (1:5). Psalm 15:2 begins with the idiom of Psalm 1:1 in its description of *one whose way of life is blameless*. The idea of one's life's journey as a walk on a path is reminiscent of the pervasive teaching in the book of Proverbs about the straight path that leads to life as opposed to the crooked path that leads to death. The first is the path of the righteous, and the second the path of the wicked. So 15:2a describes one whose life is characterized by blamelessness. The wise are called 'blameless' (*tām*) in Proverbs 2:7, 21; 11:3, 20; 13:6; 19:1; 20:7; 28:6, 10, 18; 29:10. Indeed, 'blameless' is a term used to describe Job in 1:1. The blameless are those whose lives are marked by ethical rightness, and thus their actions, according to verse 2b, are *righteous* (*ṣedeq*), that is, they do the right thing and act morally. The rest of the description of the one who can enter the holy place follows from these first two cola (which use participles to describe characteristic action) and specifies what constitutes blamelessness and right actions, giving examples expressed by finite verbs.^[31]

First, the blameless ones have integrity of speech. They speak the truth from the heart. They do not deceive; what they say represents what they truly think. But they do not necessarily say everything that is on their mind either. Verse 3a and c indicate that the blameless person does not spread evil reports about others. Verse 3b is a more general statement that the blameless person who can have access to the sanctuary does no *wrong* (or 'evil', *rā'â*) to a neighbour. Indeed, contrary to the NIV which translates *others* in verse 3c, the Hebrew has 'one close', indicating a neighbour or a friend. So a better translation would be 'casts no slur on a neighbour' (so NRSV) or possibly 'friend' (NAB). The book of Proverbs warns against slander, gossip or other hurtful uses of the tongue (Prov. 6:19; 9:7; 10:18; 11:13; 16:28; 18:3, 8; 20:19; 25:8–10, 23; 26:20, 22; 30:10),^[32] as of course does the ninth commandment: 'You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour' (Exod. 20:16).

Verse 4 changes subjects, but continues to outline the contours of a blameless person who acts appropriately. The first parallel line is an antithetical parallelism which describes the blameless person's attitudes towards others. The *vile*, or wicked, *person* receives the contempt of the righteous. This reflects God's own attitude towards those who are wicked (Job 12:21). On the other hand, the blameless person *honours* those who *fear the LORD*. Those who fear God are the devout and the faithful; they are righteous themselves. Again, the language is most familiar from the book of Proverbs (especially 1:7). Such people are humble because they know their proper place in God's creation. Such attitudes would lead the blameless person to seek the company of other righteous people and avoid association with the wicked.

The second parallel line of verse 4 changes the subject to oath keeping. Every

promise to God is considered an oath, and oaths had to be kept, except under very restricted conditions (Num. 30:1–16). Of course, a blameless person would not break an oath, no matter what. Even if it costs a person dearly, they must fulfil their promise to God. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes, reflecting similar thoughts to those in Deuteronomy, says the same concerning vows, a specific type of formal oath (Eccl. 5:4; cf. Deut. 23:21). The Teacher says that it is dangerous not to pay a vow, and so much better not to make one in the first place. While it would be easy to change one's mind to avoid fulfilling the promise, the devout person will not do so.

The final parallelism of the stanza (v. 5) speaks to the blameless person's use of money. Again, the poet uses an antithetical parallelism. In the first colon, he describes the right way to give away money, and in the second, he prohibits an evil way of gaining money. The blameless person is generous to the poor and lends money without interest. The Torah forbids anyone to charge interest on loans (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:36–37; Deut. 23:19–20). Indeed, the sages taught that 'Whoever increases wealth by taking interest or profit from the poor amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor' (Prov. 28:8). Furthermore, the blameless person does not benefit from bribes, a practice also prohibited by the Torah (Exod. 23:8; Deut. 10:17; 16:19). The book of Proverbs speaks negatively about bribes as well (17:23).

15:5c: Never shaken

The psalm ends with a climactic monocolon (although the NIV misleadingly breaks it into a bicolon). The *these things* is a reference to the attitudes and actions of the blameless person described in verses 2–5b. Such people will never be *shaken*. To be shaken means to be thrown into turmoil, but the blameless escape this fate. They will live life on an even keel.

Meaning

In answer to the question, 'Who can gain entry into the holy place?', Psalm 15 describes a person of blameless moral character and righteous action. Does this mean that sinners were prohibited from the temple precincts? Obviously not. After all, the law called on those who sinned to go to the sanctuary to offer sacrifices to show their repentance. To be blameless means to have a heart that is obedient, but when one sins, one repents and offers sacrifices in order to restore one's reputation with God. Repentant sinners who seek to obey God in the ways specified by Psalm 15 and the Torah were blameless.

Once Christ had come, there was no longer any need for a holy place where

God made his special presence known. Jesus is the very presence of God, the fulfilment of the sanctuary. Every place is holy. The Christian is a temple, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, as the sanctuary was filled with the presence of God. Nonetheless, we are called to the same character and lifestyle described by the psalmist. Like the Old Testament people of God, Christians sin, but when they do, they turn in repentance to Jesus, the only one who is truly righteous,

Psalm 16. You will not abandon me

Context

Psalm 16 begins like a lament (v. 1a), but then continues like a psalm of confidence. The composer, whom the title identifies as David, affirms both God's present blessing as well as his hope that God will rescue him, even from the ravages of death. He contrasts his course of life with that taken by those who worship false gods.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

16:1. *Keep me safe*

The psalm opens with a plea for help (*keep me safe*) and an invocation (*my God*), giving the impression that the psalm is a lament. However, verse 1b indicates that the psalmist has found refuge in God, and the rest of the psalm makes it clear that his relationship with God provides him with security, and no specific trouble is ever mentioned. Thus, the psalm is best categorized as a psalm of confidence.

16:2–4. *God is Lord*

In a lament, the psalmist would complain about enemies and perhaps even raise questions about God's willingness to help him. Here, however, the psalmist confesses that God is his *Lord* and that everything positive (*good thing*) that happens to him comes from his hand. He identifies with the *holy people who are in the land*, that is, those who have set themselves apart by virtue of their special relationship with God. He finds pleasure in his relationship with God and with God's people.

In contrast to the holy people are *those who run after other gods*. Throughout the historical books of the Old Testament, we hear story after story about how Israelites, who should worship only the Lord, are worshipping the gods of the surrounding nations, such as Baal, Marduk, and so on. The metaphor of hurrying after gods shows a certain passion and urgency that is unbecoming. The psalmist then dissociates himself from pagan ritual action (pouring out *libations of blood*) and ritual words (taking the names of false gods on his lips). The ritual action of

pouring out libations of blood is unclear, but even so, the action is patently obscene. There were legitimate libations in the Israelite cult, but they were of wine or fermented drink (perhaps beer; Num. 28:7), not blood. If the sacrifice is seen as a meal offered to the deity (an anthropomorphism, since God does not need to be fed), then the libation of wine and beer accompanies the meal of meat and grain (see Jer. 19:13; 32:29 for references to pagan libation offerings, though not specifically with blood). While blood is an integral part of the Israelite sacrificial system, the shed blood indicates the death of the animal that stands as a substitute for the sinner in an atonement sacrifice such as the burnt offering (Lev. 1), not as a drink accompanying a meal.

The psalmist distances himself from such pagan activity, since he knows that, while the worship of the true God brings good things (v. 2b), the worship of false gods brings suffering. The psalm does not specify the type of suffering, but the history of Israel and Judah demonstrates that their persistent worship of false gods eventually led to destruction and exile.

16:5–8. A delightful inheritance

The psalmist then affirms his exclusive (*you alone*) loyalty to the Lord and his confidence that he finds security in him (*you make my lot secure*). He refers to God as his *portion* (*ḥeleq*). The noun comes from the verb ‘to divide’ (*ḥlq*) and is used to refer to the apportionment of plunder (Gen. 14:24) and food (Lev. 6:10), but most often to the division and distribution of land (*NIDOTTE* 2: 162), which makes the most sense in this context (see v. 6). He then calls God his *cup*. ‘Since a cup can convey love, comfort, strength and fellowship, biblical writers sometimes use cup as a symbol for all the benefits God provides’ (see also Pss 23:5; 116:13; 1 Cor. 10:16; Ryken, et al., 1998: 186). And then finally, he refers to God as his *lot* (*gôrāl*). *Lot* can refer both to a device such as the Urim and Thummim used to indicate God’s will (Exod. 28:30), employed in the distribution of land following the conquest (Josh. 14:2), as well as to that which is allotted through such a means. God is the One who determines the psalmist’s life and provides him with what he has. Again, the reference may be specifically to land, or land may be used metaphorically here to refer to the course of his life.

As previously mentioned, the vocabulary of verse 5 (at least of *portion* and *lot*) suggests the language of land distribution. The psalmist may be speaking literally, figuratively, or perhaps both, as he happily exclaims that *the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places*. His allotment is a precious one, *a delightful inheritance*. Such divine gifts lead him to praise God and to listen to his guidance, both day and night (*even at night my heart instructs me*). His

intention is to stay loyal (*my eyes are always on the LORD*), and as a result his life will maintain an even course (*I shall not be shaken*; perhaps we should see an intentional connection to the final verse of Ps. 15).

16:9–11. *The path of life*

God is his Lord, and his Lord has given him many good things, so (*therefore*) he experiences inward happiness (*my heart is glad*) and whole-bodied confidence (*my body will rest secure*), which lead him to worship God publicly (*my tongue rejoices*).

Even so, the psalmist piles on more reasons for his praise before ending his song. How exactly to understand the import of verses 10–11 is a matter of some debate. Is he rejoicing because at present he is enjoying good health and perhaps has recently been healed from a life-threatening illness? Most scholars today take this view, believing that the doctrine of the afterlife is not clearly taught in the Old Testament, with the exception of Daniel 12:1–3.^[33] However, the statement seems even more confident and far-reaching than that interpretation allows. Even in its Old Testament context, the idea of not seeing decay and enjoying eternal pleasures in God's presence seems to point to something beyond the grave.

Meaning

The psalmist is aware that he needs God in order to be safe in this world, and so he calls out to him to keep him safe (v. 1a). The rest of the poem expresses his deeply felt confidence in God's good gifts and ability to provide the security that he needs. At the end, he asserts God's ability to keep him safe even from death itself (vv. 10–11). While some believe his confidence extends only as far as death at a young age, we would say that the psalmist is a voice that expresses hope in life even after death, and that this text provides an Old Testament background to the belief in the afterlife that comes to full blossom in the New Testament with its teaching on bodily resurrection. Certainly, reading the psalm from the vantage point of the New Testament brings out this deeper meaning. Thus, for the Christian reader, Psalm 16 provides a basis for both our confidence that God's blessings begin in this life as well as our sure hope that our life in God's presence does not end with our death.

Peter cited Psalm 16:8–11 (Septuagint) in his Pentecost sermon and applied it to Christ (Acts 2:25–28). He pointed out that David himself died and was buried, so he must have had someone else in mind, namely Jesus Christ, who was his descendant and the Messiah. Later, Paul cited Psalm 16:10 (Septuagint) during a

sermon in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:35) and also applied it to Christ, who was raised from the dead and thus was a fulfilment of the promise that 'you will not let your holy one see decay'.

How did Psalm 16, a psalm that fits well within its Old Testament context, come to be interpreted in this prophetic sense by Peter and Paul, as recorded in the book of Acts? Longenecker has the best explanation when he notes that, in Acts 2, it is quoted along with Psalm 110:1 (Acts 2:34), which Jesus had earlier treated as a prophetic psalm (Mark 12:35–37). These two psalms had been brought together, based on the rabbinic interpretive principle known as *gezerah shawah* ('verbal analogy', because of the shared phrase 'at my right hand'). Thus, this rabbinic principle of interpretation, along with 'the church's post-resurrection perspective' brings out this deeper meaning of the psalm as it anticipated Christ's death and resurrection (Longenecker 2007: 746).

Psalm 17. Vindicate me

Context

The title identifies the psalm as a prayer. Although many psalms are prayers and most contain prayer-like sections interspersed with appeals to the congregation, this psalm is pure prayer in that it is addressed solely to God whose intimate presence the psalmist experiences. Specifically, this psalm is a lament calling out to God for help in the midst of trouble perpetrated by unnamed enemies. The call for vindication, the suggestion of an accusation of bribery (v. 4) and the claim of innocence suggest that a false accusation lies behind the psalm. It is identified as a prayer of David, although it is difficult to pinpoint a specific event in David's life where this psalm would find its place.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

17:1–2. *Hear my prayer*

Like a typical lament, the psalmist begins with a series of pleas for help (*Hear me; listen to my cry; hear my prayer*) and an invocation (*LORD*). The ground of the appeal is the innocence of the speaker. God should listen because his *plea is just* ³⁴ and he does not speak with *deceitful lips*. After beginning with imperatives, the first stanza closes with the wish that God would do the right thing and vindicate him. We are not yet aware of the nature of the psalmist's trouble, but we do know that he does not deserve what is happening to him.

17:3–5. *Examine me*

In the second stanza, the psalmist continues to assert his innocence, which extends beyond his actions to include his thoughts and motives. He has no fear if God should choose to *probe* his heart (cf. Ps. 139:23–24). Even at *night*, a time of darkness when wickedness is at its worst (Job 38:12–15), God will find nothing wrong with him. He has not thought, spoken or done any evil. Using the language of wisdom literature, he has stuck to God's *paths*, and because of that he has not stumbled. His specific denial of taking a *bribe* may refer to an actual accusation that he refutes. Of course, bribes distort justice, so the charge would thus be a serious one.

17:6–9. *Protect me*

The psalmist continues his appeal to God to pay attention to his prayer. He asks God to demonstrate his *great love* towards him. The term *great love* (*hesed*) refers to the loyalty between covenant partners that manifests itself in saving action. The covenant God saves his faithful people with his *right hand*, a phrase that often denotes God's military action against those who want to harm his people (Exod. 15:6, 12; Ps. 118:15–16; Isa. 41:10).

The psalmist calls on God to protect him like *the apple of your eye*, probably better translated as 'pupil of the eye' (so NJB); at least, that is certainly what the phrase refers to. Of course, the pupil of the eye is a sensitive and tender spot on the body. God protected Israel in the wilderness like the 'apple of his eye' (Deut. 32:10). The parallel uses another touching image of a mother bird protecting its young from predators (see *Comment* at 91:3–8), the predators in this case being his wicked enemies who surround him.

17:10–12. *Enemy predators*

The psalmist then describes his enemies, first mentioned in verse 9, as lions, predators who stealthily stalk their prey in order to destroy them. Lions are metaphors for their ruthless cruelty (Pss 7:2; 10:9; 22:13). Their hearts are hard (*callous*) and their speech full of pride. The translation *they close up their callous hearts* involves a suggested textual change from the received text, which simply says, 'they closed up their fat', to the NIV rendering, which changes *ḥelbāmô* ('their fat') to *ḥēleb libbāmô* ('the fat of their heart'). These enemies are dangerous and provide a substantial threat to the psalmist.

17:13–15. *Rise up, Lord!*

The psalmist begins the final climactic stanza by calling on God to *rise up*, an expression that identifies the psalm as a pre-battle song in its original setting (see 7:6; 9:19; 10:12; 17:13; 74:22, etc.). He calls on God the Warrior to intervene and deliver him from his vicious and powerful enemies. The second half of verse 14 is an imprecation that calls on God to orchestrate the destruction of these enemies and their offspring.^[35] Exactly what God has stored up for the bellies of the wicked and their children is not clear, but from the context we know it works to their detriment.

In contrast, the psalmist knows that he will be vindicated in the end and will maintain his intimate relationship with God (*I shall see your face*). The exact import of his statement that he will awake and be satisfied with seeing God's likeness or form is unclear, since there is no earlier mention to his being asleep.

Perhaps it is a reference to literal sleep and this psalm is an evening prayer. Or perhaps his present troubles have put him in a daze from which he knows he will eventually wake up. Or is he talking about an intimate relationship with God that will survive even death, often described as a type of sleep in the Old Testament (Ps. 76:5; Dan. 12:2)? Whatever the meaning in its Old Testament context, the light of the more robust teaching on the afterlife given in the New Testament allows us to read it in that fuller sense.

Meaning

This lament calls on God for help in the midst of an attack, perhaps specifically a false accusation, by enemies. The psalmist knows that he does not deserve this ill-treatment and thus appeals to God to vindicate him on the basis of his righteousness. This psalm can thus provide a model prayer for any who suffer for no apparent cause, particularly those who are being harassed or persecuted by others.

The psalm ends with the confident hope that the psalmist will be vindicated and will come into the very presence of God. As discussed above, the psalmist hints at a continuing experience of God's presence, even after death (*when I awake*, v. 15). He imagines that at that time his satisfaction will be in seeing God's likeness. The apostle John looks forward to such a day: 'When Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2)

Psalm 18. The Divine Warrior rescues the king

Context

Psalm 18 is a thanksgiving song for a royal victory. The historical title (*when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul*) is supported by the contents describing rescue from vicious enemies. The psalm itself also indicates that the original composer was a king when it concludes the story of rescue by proclaiming, *He gives his king great victories; he shows unfailing love to his anointed, to David and to his descendants for ever.*

Furthermore, only a king could call himself *the head of nations* (v. 43b) and say *foreigners cower before me* (v. 44). For other parts of the title, see the Introduction. In addition, 2 Samuel 22 presents a close variant of Psalm 18 and connects it to David.

The psalm is one of the longest in the book, but it is far from tedious, being filled with dramatic action and intense emotion. The psalmist begins by expressing his love for his strong God (v. 1) and offers a series of metaphors of divine protection (v. 2). He then proceeds to illustrate God's strength and protection by rehearsing his rescue at a time of great distress. At first, he describes his dire situation in general terms. Death was reaching up and pulling him into the grave (vv. 3–5). When God hears his prayer for help, he responds by riding down from heaven in the fullness of his glory, his cloud chariot accompanied by cherubim (vv. 6–15). God the Warrior causes the earth to heave and the seas to dry up as he routs the psalmist's enemies. He then grabs hold of the endangered psalmist and brings him to a safe place (vv. 16–19).

As the psalmist reflects on his rescue, he affirms that it was an outworking of God's justice. The psalmist was righteous and God takes care of the righteous, while he destroys the wicked (vv. 20–24, 25–29).

Comment

18:1. *I love you*

Rather than beginning with an account of his rescue, the psalmist opens with an affirmation of his love for God. The verb translated *love* (*rḥm*) is elsewhere used only to refer to the compassion or mercy that God demonstrates towards human beings.^[36] The term expresses the psalmist's intimate feelings towards God,

evoked by God's actions towards him, to be explained in the following verses. Indeed, here, God is called *my strength*, and the poetic narrative that follows will demonstrate how he manifested his power to rescue the psalmist at a vulnerable time.

18:2. My protection

God manifested his strength to the psalmist by protecting him, and thus verse 2 contains a number of metaphors of protection, beginning with the image of God as *rock*.^[37] As is often pointed out, this is not a rock that can be held in the hand because, as the second colon expands on the idea (v. 2b), this is a rock in which the psalmist can find refuge. In other words, it is big enough (perhaps a cliff) that the psalmist can slip into a crevice and hide from the onslaught of his enemies.

A second metaphor of protection is found in the word *fortress*, sometimes understood to mean 'mountain stronghold'.^[38] Perhaps the fact that David sought refuge from Saul in such natural fortresses (1 Sam. 23:14, 19, 29) helps to explain the historical title (see *Context*). A third metaphor of protection describes God as a *shield*, yet another common image found in the Psalms (3:3; 5:12; 7:10; 28:7, etc.). Next, the psalmist proclaims God as the *horn* of his salvation. Horn in the Old Testament signifies power. It is connected to the horn of an animal such as a bull. God indeed is the power behind the psalmist's rescue, as he will describe and celebrate it in verses 6–15. Finally, the psalmist announces that God is his *stronghold*, a word similar to fortress and often used in conjunction with it. The verb from the noun (*mišgāb*) means 'to be (inaccessibly) high' (*NIDOTTE* 3: 1216), so one again pictures a defensive location in the mountains.

18:3–5. I almost died

As is typical in thanksgiving psalms, the poet now remembers his earlier trouble and how God intervened to rescue him. Verse 3 begins with the happy ending. The poet had called on God in prayer in the midst of his struggles, and the result was that God saved him from his enemies. The following verses will fill out the details. Because God rescued him, God deserves praise, and this poem serves to do just that.

In verses 3–4, the psalmist uses figurative language to say that he was seriously threatened by the possibility of death. Later it will become clear that the threat came from enemies who sought to kill him. Here death itself is treated as an animate object that tried to trap and drag the psalmist into its realm. The *grave* (Sheol)/*death* utilizes *cords* and *snares* as weapons. The psalmist describes his danger in terms of being overwhelmed by *torrents of destruction*, utilizing a

common image of waters to signify chaos.

18:6–15. God rides into battle

This stanza dramatically describes God's rescue of the psalmist from his death-threatening trouble. Again he mentions his prayer to God in the midst of his distress (v. 6). He was beyond his own human resources and knew it, so he called on God to help him. God made his presence known on earth in the sanctuary, and so the psalmist directed his prayers towards the temple and God heard his prayer. When Solomon dedicated the temple, he realized, as did the psalmist, that God's presence was not limited to the temple. Not even heaven itself can contain God (1 Kgs 8:27). However, Solomon also spoke of a situation very similar to that in which the psalmist found himself, when he stated: 'When your people go to war against their enemies, wherever you send them, and when they pray to the LORD towards the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name, then hear from heaven their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause' (1 Kgs 8:44–45).

God did indeed hear, and he rushed down from heaven in order to save the psalmist. God appeared as a Warrior in order to fight against his enemies. When the Warrior appears, the earth and the very mountains themselves shake.^[39] God was angry with the treatment the psalmist had received. God's anger is often described as a *consuming fire*, as in verse 8. The picture of God coming to the rescue riding a cloud (*dark clouds were under his feet*, v. 9b) derives ultimately from Ancient Near Eastern storm-god imagery^[40] and is also found elsewhere in Scripture (Pss 68:33; 104:3–4).^[41] The *cherubim* were among God's most powerful angelic forces. They were stationed at the entrance of the Garden of Eden with flaming swords after Adam and Eve had been forced out (Gen. 3:24). They also accompanied God's chariot when he abandoned the temple in Ezekiel 9 – 11. In short, they are God's bodyguards in the heavenly army, and they came with him now to rescue the psalmist. The picture here is of the cloud as the chariot, and the cherubim as the means of propulsion of the chariots, as God rode to the aid of the distressed psalmist.

God controls the weather and used it as his weapon in his deliverance of the psalmist. In particular, he used *hailstones and bolts of lightning* (v. 12b), reminiscent of his battle against the southern Canaanite forces in Joshua 10 (see v. 11). They were like his arrows as he shot them at his enemies.

God's anger and power are so great that they exposed the *valleys of the sea*. Again, the waters, in this case the sea, often personify the forces of chaos and evil ranged against God. But here they are no match for the Divine Warrior.

18:16–19. *The rescue*

The psalmist was in deep trouble, confronted by enemies more powerful than himself. He pictures himself in *deep waters*,^[42] a frequent image signifying chaos and evil. God, though, swoops down from heaven on his cloud chariot powered by cherubim to bring him out of his distress. He was in a tight spot, but God took him to a *spacious place* (v. 19b). God rescued him because he delighted in him.

18:20–24. *God's reward*

This stanza explains why God delighted in him and rescued him. The psalmist is righteous. He has acted with integrity in his relationship with God and with others. He keeps God's law. The law in the book of Deuteronomy (chs. 4 – 26) is followed by the blessings and curses (chs. 27 – 28). The latter are reserved for those who disobey God; the former for those who obey him. Since the psalmist obeyed, he rightly experiences the blessings of the covenant, which include deliverance from enemies: 'The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven' (Deut. 28:7).

18:25–29. *The humble and the haughty*

Verses 25–27 state the principle by which God operates. He is *faithful* to those who are faithful. The noun and the root of the verb connote covenant love or loyalty (*ḥsd*). God had promised to be Israel's God and that they would be his people, and here he demonstrates this truth to the psalmist by rescuing him from his enemies. The same point is made in verse 25, using a different noun and verbal root that means 'to be blameless/innocent' (*tmm*). The blameless are those whose lives are marked by ethical rightness. By the use of a verb and noun from the same root ('to be pure' [*brr* I]), the psalmist makes it clear a third time that God is good to those who live in accordance with his law. That God treats people as they deserve is expressed in a negative sense when it says that God shrewdly treats those who are devious. Verse 27 uses an antithetical parallelism to drive the point home. God saves the humble but will put down those who have pride.^[43]

Verse 28 now applies the principles of the preceding verses to the psalmist. His only source of illumination in the dark place where he finds himself is provided by God. The darkness he now faces is his enemy, but God keeps the oil in his lamp burning so that he can see what he is doing. The NIV signals a translation enigma, preferring the rendering: *with your help I can advance against a troop*, rather than the alternative found in the footnote: 'with your help I can run through a barricade'. In either case, along with the second colon (*with*

my God I can scale a wall ⁴⁴), the psalmist proclaims that God enables him to overcome any obstacle put in his way by his militaristic enemies.

18:30–36. *The Lord is the only God*

God's help, as described in the previous stanza, inspires the psalmist to extol him. God's word is *flawless* in that he fulfils his promises of protection of his people (v. 30c connects back to v. 2). There were many false gods in Israel's cultural environment, but the psalmist realizes that there really is only one true God, *the LORD* (Yahweh). And Yahweh is a protective *Rock* (see comment on v. 2).

The psalmist realizes that God has helped him not only by direct intervention (described in vv. 6–19), but also in giving him his skill as a warrior (vv. 32–36). His success as a warrior is due to God, not his own native abilities. He can protect himself because of God's *saving help* (v. 35a). He can attack with a bow because of God's training. He is nimble and sure-footed in battle because of God's provision.

18:37–49. *Victory*

Because of God's enabling (vv. 30–36), the psalmist gained the upper hand over his enemies (vv. 37–39). Indeed, he completely overwhelmed them and destroyed them. Admirably, the psalmist does not dwell long on his achievements without giving the glory to God. What he has done, he has accomplished through the power of God (vv. 38–40). Although the enemy sought God's help, they were too late; God did not listen to their cries, but allowed the psalmist to complete his victory over them (vv. 41–42). Employing two similes (*beating into dust; trampling like mud*), he emphasizes his total dominance of his foes.

But again, he moves quickly from his own role and acknowledges God's help. He won only because of God (v. 43a), and his victory granted him status, *the head of nations*. His defeat of his enemies causes other nations to submit to him (vv. 43c–45). God is the One who gave him victory and status against his enemies; thus, he praises God (vv. 46–49).

18:50. *God loves David*

The psalm ends by identifying the psalmist as the king, the *anointed one* or Messiah (see title and discussion in *Context*). God had promised to show his *unfailing love* (*hesed*) to David and his descendants in the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:1–16), and the psalmist understands the victory God has given him as

an expression of that covenant commitment.

Meaning

In Psalm 18, the king expresses gratitude to God for rescuing him from his enemies through a military victory. Others, though, can use this psalm as a model prayer for their own experience of God's salvation from trouble. Indeed, Christian readers are engaged in a spiritual battle (Eph. 6:10–20) and must call on God's help against these overwhelming foes. Interestingly, as the psalmist describes God riding on a cloud to deliver him (vv. 6–15), Jesus is often pictured as riding a cloud chariot when he returns to achieve his people's ultimate rescue (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27. Rev. 1:7). While the psalmist appealed to his own righteousness (vv. 20–24), the Christian can point to the righteousness of Christ and his promises to be with us in our difficulties.

Indeed, we can read Psalm 18 as a song of Jesus, David's greater Son. He suffered the coiling 'cords of death' (v. 5) in his crucifixion, but also experienced the power of God who raised him from the dead (Rom. 8:11). God indeed 'dealt with [Jesus] according to [his] righteousness' (v. 20). He conquered his enemies, the powers and principalities. Paul seems to have read Psalm 18 with Jesus as the first-person speaker as he cites verse 49: 'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name' (Rom. 15:9), along with other Old Testament passages that signal the inclusion of the Gentiles in the covenant promises.

Psalm 19. The heavens declare God's glory

Context

Psalm 19 is best known for its thoughtful and powerful reflection upon God's self-disclosure to humanity. He makes himself known through his creation, in particular through the skies dominated during the day by the sun (vv. 1–6), and through the law (vv. 7–11). As Brown suggests, 'The sun's traditional association with justice and law in Near Eastern antiquity provides strong precedent for the connection between the sun and torah in Psalm 19' (Brown 2010: 262). If these verses were the sum total of the poem, then it would be properly designated a wisdom poem. However, verses 12–13 introduce a confession of sin, both wilful and hidden, as well as an appeal to God for help, thus indicating that Psalm 19 is a lament. The psalm ends with the composer's request that God would accept his prayer.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

19:1–6. The heavens declare

God makes himself known through his creation. The apostle Paul understood this when he said, 'Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made' (Rom. 1:20). He makes the point that people have no excuse for not knowing and not thanking God. The psalmist clearly is among those who see God's hand and power in his creative work. In words made famous by Beethoven, *the heavens declare the glory of God*. The *skies* proclaim his handiwork. The word for 'skies' refers to the hard dome mentioned in Genesis 1:7 that holds up the 'water above'.

Even to the ancients, who did not have an awareness of the actual vastness of the heavens or the size of the sun, moon and stars, the skies gave a sense of transcendence, of someone above themselves. Even today, with all of modern science's descriptions and explanations, it is not rare for us to have our minds stunned by God's incredible creation.

And, the psalmist tells us, the heavens communicate this knowledge to us wordlessly. They *pour forth speech*, even though *they use no words*. Even

though *no sound is heard from them, their voice goes out into all the earth*. Both the night and the day sky demonstrate God's glory. This wordless speech extends throughout the entire world. All the earth is beneath God's awesome heavens.

The psalmist calls our attention specifically to the *sun*, the most dominant of the heavenly bodies. Using poetic personification, the poet points out that the sun lives in the sky. That is where God has placed its tent. Verse 5 then uses two similes to emphasize the passionate energy of the sun as it races across the sky. It *is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course*. Even with the use of poetic personification, the psalmist leaves us in no doubt that the sun is a creation of God, thus separating biblical religion from the surrounding pagan cultures that believed the sun was a deity. Furthermore, God uses the sun for good purpose: the warming of the earth (v. 6c).

19:7–11. The glorious law of God

In verse 7, we have an abrupt change of subject from God's creation to God's law. However, both creation and law are God's self-disclosure to humanity. The law gives us a more specific understanding of it.

The poet doesn't just speak about the law; he praises it, describing its excellent qualities and benefits. Verses 7–9 present six bicola. Each uses a different term for the law (*law, statutes, precepts, commands, fear* and *decrees of the LORD*) and then praises it by describing it as *perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure* and *firm*. The second colon of these six bicola tantalizes and attracts the reader to the law because of its benefits. It transforms the lives of those who read it. They are refreshed from their hard labour (v. 7b). The simple become wise, able to live with skill in the world (v. 7d). The law can turn a sad person into a joyful one (v. 8a), and it offers illumination to those who would otherwise be blind (v. 8d). The *fear of the LORD* (v. 9a) is the one phrase that is not a familiar term for law. But it is well known from the instruction of wisdom literature, which is related to law, since both law and wisdom impart God's will for how his people should live. Here we do not hear a benefit for the people, but rather that it will endure forever. The same may be said of the final bicolon of the last parallel line, which does not give a benefit but a further characterization of the law as *righteous*.

Verse 10 praises God's law by saying it is more precious than the most precious *gold* and sweeter than the sweetest *honey*. After all, God's law warns those who heed it against doing things that offend God and also harm the person who breaks it. The law can literally bring great reward: it is followed by the blessings and the curses (see Deut. 27 – 28 after the law in chs. 4 – 26 as an

example). The covenant law promises blessings, such as victory in warfare, happy families, material prosperity, health, and so on, to those who follow it.

19:12–13. Forgive me and guide me

Although God reveals himself and his ways through creation and the law, the psalmist acknowledges that he still lives in some measure of ignorance, particularly with regard to his sins. He worries about *hidden faults* as well as *wilful sins*. He realizes that he does not have the resources to know himself or to control himself completely, so he wisely asks God to help him.

19:14. The meditation of my heart

He concludes this powerful prayer by asking God to accept his words as pleasing. He names God as his *Rock* (an image of protection; see Ps. 18:2) and his *Redeemer*. He offers both his thoughts (*this meditation of my heart*) as well as his prayer (*these words of my mouth*) to God.

Meaning

Psalm 19 bears testimony to God's self-disclosure in his work of creation and in his law. Paul understood that God's proclamation through creation continues in the New Testament period. As mentioned above, this idea seems behind Paul's point that people are without excuse, since God has made knowledge of himself manifest in his creation (Rom. 1:18–20). While the apostle does not explicitly cite Psalm 19 at that place, he does so in 10:18. Paul has been arguing that people can believe only if someone preaches to them. Someone has to be sent to them to preach the gospel so that they hear it and then believe and call on God's name. In Romans 10:18, Paul asks, 'Did they not hear?' and answers his own question by saying, 'Of course they did.' He then substantiates his point by citing Psalm 19:4: 'Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.' As Moo points out, Paul exercises some freedom in his use of this quotation, since the psalm refers to the voice of creation, while Paul refers to the preachers who are proclaiming the gospel. Moo, in addition, rightly suggests that Paul uses a hyperbole when he says that this message has gone out 'to the ends of the earth' (Moo 2000: 342–345).

Reading the psalm from a New Testament perspective leads to further reflections. For instance, besides creation, the psalm extols the law as revelatory of God to humanity. Christians would concur and understand that God's word includes not just the Old but also the New Testaments. Most importantly, the Christian understands that the most perfect proclamation of God to humans is

Jesus Christ himself. As the author of Hebrews puts it, ‘In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe’ (Heb. 1:1–2).

Psalm 20. Prayer for the king

Context

Psalms 20 and 21 form a pair of royal psalms. They are both prayers on behalf of the king and both are set at a time of battle. While Psalm 20 asks that the Lord grant all the king's requests (v. 5c), Psalm 21 thanks God for granting the king his heart's desire and the request of his lips (v. 2). Psalm 20, though, also expresses certainty that God will answer his prayers, and Psalm 21 recognizes that there are requests yet to be fulfilled.

Psalm 20 in particular is a prayer for the king, who is addressed in the second person in verses 1–5 and then in the third person in verses 6–9. Interestingly, David is named as the author in the title, and it is not impossible that the king could have composed this song, but it is more likely that the song was recited by a third party on behalf of the king. The psalm is a pre-battle song requesting help in warfare, but also expressing confidence in the outcome. 2 Chronicles 20:20–21 gives a hint at the pre-battle spiritual preparations and the words of encouragement spoken by the king, as well as the role of the priests, and perhaps gives us a glimpse of the type of situation that would have provided a concrete setting for the use of this psalm (Wilson 2002: 381–382). Of course, like all psalms, it is historically non-specific (see Introduction) and thus could be used in any number of battles.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

20:1–5. *May God answer you*

While the prayer in the first stanza is on behalf of an unidentified person addressed in the second-person singular (*you*), the second stanza makes it clear that that person is none other than the king (vv. 6–9). The psalmist asks that God might hear the king when he prays in times of *distress*. Again, the distress is not immediately identified, but in the second stanza it becomes clear that this trouble arises from enemies and that the solution to the distress is a military victory.

The prayer is directed towards God, who made his presence known among his people at the *sanctuary* located on Mount *Zion*. Thus, the *support* and *help* requested by the psalmist would be forthcoming from that location, the place

where God made his presence known. He requests help for the king from *the name of the God of Jacob*. The speaker does not intend any kind of magical use of the name, but rather the name is ‘a token of God’s self-revelation and his readiness to be invoked’ (Kidner 1975: 101). The name *God of Jacob* is short for the longer name, ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, used at the burning bush and connected to the Lord, the God of the exodus (Wilson 2002: 383). The psalmist places before God the sacrifices, in particular the *burnt offerings* (‘ōlâ), that the king has offered. The burnt offering was an atonement offering, restoring relationship with God after sin (Lev. 1). In other words, the psalmist appeals to the king’s righteousness as grounds for God to respond favourably to the king’s requests. In Psalm 18, we observed that the king cited his righteousness as the reason why God saved him in such a dramatic fashion. If we are correct in seeing this psalm as a pre-battle holy-war song, we should note that it was important to offer sacrifices on the eve of a battle, as we learn from the story in 1 Samuel 13, although here Saul wrongly offers the sacrifices himself rather than waiting for Samuel the priest.

In verse 4, the psalmist asks that God might help the king succeed in his *plans*, probably a reference to his battle plans against the enemy. When God does so respond, the resulting victory will lead to great rejoicing (v. 5). The exact import of the lifting of *banners* is not clear, but certainly in some sense they communicated the victory. They may have been the battle standards of the army, waved in triumph after a successful battle.

The first half of the psalm ends with a summary statement that God would grant all the king’s requests (v. 5c), or at least all the requests connected to the particular battle that he was facing.

20:6–8. Victory!

The composer moves from expressing a blessing on the king to announcing an oracle. He prefaces his words with a statement of certainty (*Now this I know*). He has no doubt as to the outcome of the battle, and for the first time we hear for whom the psalmist is praying. The *you* of the first five verses is now identified as the *anointed*, that is, the king. The title (*māšîaḥ*) emanates from the ritual of the inauguration of the king, the pouring of oil on his head symbolizing God’s Spirit that comes on the person to confer his status and equip him for his royal task (1 Sam. 16:13).

The king’s victory is assured by God. In verse 2, the prayer requests divine help from the sanctuary in Zion; here we learn (v. 6) that this help comes from his *heavenly sanctuary*. Of course, these are not two different places. The earthly

sanctuary situated on Mount Zion in Jerusalem is an earthly symbol of God's heavenly abode. Mount Zion connects heaven and earth. The answer comes in the form of a power that leads to victory, a power that is represented by God's *right hand*, often associated with God's warring activity (Exod. 15:6, 12; Isa. 41:10).

The composer's assurance of victory leads him to articulate a principle that may be seen as the heart of holy-war theology in the Old Testament. The confidence of Israel and its king is not situated in their military power but in their God, the Warrior who fights on their behalf. This theology finds concrete expression in David as he faces Goliath. Before throwing the stone from his sling, he boldly says, 'You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied' (1 Sam. 17:45). Since God fights for his anointed, the enemy is defeated (*brought to their knees and fall*), while God's people prevail (*we rise up and stand firm*).

20:9. Answer us

After the blessing (vv. 1–5) and the oracle (vv. 6–8), the speaker now turns to prayer (accepting along with the NIV a slight emendation to the Hebrew), that is, directly addressing God and asking God to provide what he is certain he will provide, namely victory in battle.

Meaning

The battlefield was the original setting for this psalm which confidently asks God for victory in the face of an enemy. Today, the people of God are a spiritual entity (the church), not a nation state with armies and physical enemies that attack it with swords, spears or other physical weapons. Even so, the church and individual Christians are in a battle, 'not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12). Against these enemies, 'the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world', but rather we need 'divine power to demolish strongholds' (2 Cor. 10:4). It is in the context of spiritual warfare that Psalm 20 retains its relevance in the life of God's people today.

Psalm 21. Past and future victory

Context

The composer, probably a priest representing the people, speaks about the king. This royal psalm is connected to warfare and begins with joyful thanks concerning a victory. While the psalm was likely composed in the aftermath of a particular battle, the psalm is historically non-specific (see Introduction), so it could be used time and time again. Psalm 21 seems to be a pair with Psalm 20, since Psalm 20 ends with an appeal for help in battle, while Psalm 21 begins by thanking God for victory (vv. 1–7). However, the latter ends with a confident statement about a future, more definitive victory (vv. 8–13).

The title names David as the author, but then the psalm itself speaks about the king in the third person. The king as song composer could certainly write about his office in the third person, but it is also possible that the psalmist is some second party who speaks about the king. See Introduction: Titles, p. 30, for director of music.

Comment

21:1. The king rejoices

The psalmist speaks to God and describes the king's glee in God's *strength*. The second colon speaks of *victories* given by God, and thus the first part of this psalm (vv. 2–7) celebrates a military victory. God's strength manifests itself through victory. The king's army has won a battle, but the king knows that victory has been won only because God the Warrior has provided it.

21:2–7. God has answered the king's prayer

This stanza thanks God for answering earlier prayers of the king, specified in the next few verses, and demonstrates that more than one prayer is in view here. As a general principle, God has given the king *his heart's desire* (v. 2a), which is also described as *the request of his lips* (v. 2b). What began as the king's inward desire issued forth in the material form of a prayer request, and God has granted his requests. The impression is that the king asked, and everything he requested was provided. If that is the case, it would indicate that the king's desires are consonant with the desires and will of God himself.

The parallelism in verse 3 is a fine example of how a B line sharpens an A line (see Introduction: Poetic style, pp. 42–47). The psalmist begins with a broad statement, stating that God has given the king *rich blessings*, while in verse 3b he highlights one of those rich blessings, namely the kingship, here represented by way of metonymy by *a crown of pure gold*. The king owes his kingship to God. If David is intended, the account in 1 Samuel of his rise to kingship does indeed show how God provided the kingship to the young shepherd boy. Of course, all of David's descendants, deserving or not, who ascended to the throne also did so because of God's provision through the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7).

The king also requested *life* from God, and God gave it to him (v. 4a). The second colon (v. 4b) says that God gave him *length of days*, indicating a long life, but then it goes on to say *life for ever and ever*. Exactly how we are to understand the reference to 'for ever' is not clear. Presumably, when the psalm was written, the king was still alive. Could this be a reference to the afterlife? Or simply a wish that the king would live to a ripe old age? In any case, in this instance the language may suggest a reference beyond the human king (see *Meaning*).

God has also granted the king fame and dignity through the victories he has won for him (v. 4). Indeed, the king has received *glory* (*kābôd*), *splendour* (*hôd*) and *majesty* (*hādār*) because God has won victories on his behalf. These qualities are most often associated with God himself, but he allows his anointed king to reflect them (Longman 2010: 47–78).

The rich blessings (v. 3a) are *unending* (v. 6a), giving the impression that the previous verses are only the tip of the iceberg. What truly makes the king glad is the blessing of God's *presence*. God is with him and that is why the blessings flow. Joseph illustrates the connection between divine presence and blessing. In Genesis 39, the prosperity of Potiphar's household is clearly connected to God being 'with him' (vv. 2–3), as is Joseph's well-being when he was incarcerated in the prison (vv. 21, 23).

The final verse of the stanza (v. 7) gives the reason why (*for*) the king has enjoyed success. The king trusts God, and thus God's *unfailing love* or covenant loyalty will keep his path steady.

21:8–12. God will destroy the king's enemies

In the first stanza, the psalmist thanked God for past blessings; in the present stanza, he now looks forward confidently to future blessings. After all, God's rich blessings (v. 3a) are unending (v. 6a). The second-person reference (*you*) continues to refer to God, and the target of God's future victory is God's *enemies*

(v. 8a), who are also enemies of the godly king who is the subject of the psalm.

God's encounter and triumph over these enemies is pictured in verse 8 by the anthropomorphism of God grabbing them with his *hand*. The A colon uses the general term for hand (*yād*), while the B colon refers to his right hand (*yāmîn*), the hand of power. Both God's hand and his right hand are often used to indicate God's overwhelming power in the context of a military confrontation (Exod. 15:6; Pss 17:7; 44:3; 60:5; 98:1; 108:6; 138:7; 139:10).

God's destructive power is described as fire that burns up the enemy (v. 9). God will burn them as in a *blazing furnace*. Isaiah pictures the Lord's furnace of judgment set up in Jerusalem in order to consume the Assyrians (Isa. 31:9). Malachi looks forward to the coming day (of the Lord) which will 'burn like a furnace' (Mal. 4:1). Verse 9c uses another common verb (*swallow*) for the destruction (*bāla* 'see Job 2:3; 8:18; Isa. 25:7–8).

God's anger towards these foes arises from their own attacks against him. They *plot evil* against God. Perhaps these plots are actually against God's people, but that would be like attacking God himself. Their plots are 'in vain' (Ps. 2:1), because God is not threatened by mere humans. Verse 12 pictures these evil plotters in rapid retreat as they flee from God the Warrior, who has pointed his bow at them. As Psalm 7 pointed out, if evil people 'do not relent, he will sharpen his sword; he will bend and string his bow. He has prepared his deadly weapons; he makes ready his flaming arrows' (vv. 12–13).

21:13. *Be exalted*

As in the first verse, so in the last, the focus is on God's *strength*. God has won and will win victories on behalf of his anointed king and his people, and thus deserves their praise.

Meaning

This prayer on behalf of the king thanks God for past blessings, including victory, and looks forward confidently to a future, more definitive defeat of those who plot against God. This is a royal psalm in that it is a prayer for the king, and it appeals to God as a Warrior who takes care of the king and his people. Thus, like the other Divine-Warrior hymns of the Psalter, Christians now read this prayer in the context of spiritual warfare, knowing that Jesus has defeated Satan on the cross (Col. 2:13–15), although the battle continues to rage until the end, when he will return again and completely destroy his enemies (Rev. 19:11–21). Indeed, as Goldingay and others have pointed out, the second stanza of Psalm 21 likely stands behind Paul's words of encouragement to those who were being

persecuted in the church in Thessalonica:

He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marvelled at among all those who have believed.

(2 Thess. 1:6–10; Goldingay 2006: 318–319)

Psalm 22. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Context

Christian readers almost immediately read Psalm 22 as pointing to the death of Christ, since it is so often quoted in the Passion Narratives of the New Testament. While we will consider the Christological import of the psalm later (under *Meaning*), this song served as a lament for the people of God during the Old Testament period. The title claims that David wrote the song, and there is no good reason to doubt this tradition. The psalm is a prayer by an individual who feels abandoned by God in the midst of the vicious attack of his enemies, and the historical books of the Old Testament record more than one occasion in David's life that could have produced such a composition. That said, as usual, the psalm is devoid of specific historical references, because it was written not to create a historical record, but for use by later worshippers in a similar, though not necessarily identical, situation.

The psalm begins by asking God why he has been absent from the psalmist (vv. 1–2), even though Israel praises him and he has rescued his ancestors in the past (vv. 3–5). Since God is absent, the psalmist's enemies have demeaned him (vv. 6–8). He feels sub-human (v. 6), even though he has had a relationship with God since birth (vv. 9–11). He then complains about the harmful actions of his enemies, referring to them using animal analogies (bulls, lions, dogs), and notes his fearful response (vv. 12–18). He makes one final appeal for help (vv. 19–21) before concluding his prayer with praise (vv. 22–31). For the rest of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

22:1–2. Why?

The psalm begins with a question made famous by Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34), the significance of which will be discussed below (*Meaning*). In its Old Testament context, the cry is uttered by the psalmist and taken up by later worshippers when they felt abandoned by God in the midst of their pain. The one praying has not yet given up on God. After all, he addresses his challenge to God himself, but he has not yet experienced any

concrete response to his cries for help in his struggle. Thus, God appears far from saving him. Of course, the psalmist does not detail the exact nature of his problem, thus allowing later worshippers to use this prayer as a model of their own when they find themselves in similar, though not necessarily identical, straits. Verse 2 tells us that God has not responded to the prayer for help, even though the psalmist has been asking constantly (*day and night*).

22:3–5. *You rescued our ancestors*

God's silence is baffling and confusing in the light of the praises and trust of Israel in the past. Verse 3 has been rendered differently depending on where the poetic division is set. The NRSV represents one school of thought with: 'Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel' (see also NJB and NLT). However, the NIV is more likely, since typically the first colon is longer than the second in Hebrew parallelism: *Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises*. Fortunately, the meaning is not widely divergent, in that both appeal to God's uniqueness (*holy*), his kingship, and as the recipient of Israel's praise. While the NRSV's version captures the imagination, God's kingship is not dependent on Israel's praise, although it is possible to understand Israel's praise as an acknowledgment of the reality of his rule.

The psalmist is also confused because in the past (*our ancestors*) Israel cried out to God for help, and they were rescued from their calamity and not shamed by being left in their troubles. If he cared to, the psalmist could have identified any number of instances, but perhaps the most striking was the exodus. Why is God not responding to him as he responded to his ancestors in the past?

22:6–8. *I am a worm*

God's silence has provided the opportunity for his opponents to revile him. They insult him and shake their heads, a gesture of derision. They mock his trust in God and the fact that he claims that God *delights* in him. If that were the case, they reason, God would have rescued him already. Such scorn and God's lack of help lead him to appraise himself as *a worm and not a man*. A worm is corrupting and corrupted. Worms spoil the things that they consume, whether the manna in the wilderness (Exod. 16:20, 24) or dead bodies (Isa. 14:11). Their association with the grave and with dead bodies also highlights the fragility and temporariness of life. The truth of the matter is that human beings are a little lower than God (see Ps. 8:5), but the psalmist's present condition makes him feel like the lowest of animal life.

22:9–10. *Since birth*

He is further stupefied by God's silence, because his relationship with God goes back to his birth. God was the agent of his birth (v. 9a), and from the day of his birth God has been his God. He has trusted God from infancy (*even at my mother's breast*). Earlier we saw him draw a connection between trust in God and deliverance (v. 4), so the unspoken point here is that, although from birth he has always trusted God, he has not yet been rescued from his trouble.

22:11. *Come close*

We now get a plea for help, typical of lament (*Do not be far from me*), although a plea for help is likely implied in his cries of anguish (v. 1c). He specifically asks that God not be far from him, which is how he has experienced him so far (v. 1b). He is in trouble and beyond human aid, and so far God has not responded (*there is no one to help*).

22:12–18. *The attack of the enemy*

The psalmist's enemies are likened to dangerous and powerful animals, *bulls* and *lions*. They outnumber him (*many*) and are vastly more powerful than he is. He is a worm and they are bulls, even *bulls of Bashan*, a region noted for its impressive cattle (Deut. 32:14; Ezek. 39:18; Amos 4:1). They are lions that rip open their prey, and he is the prey (see comment at 17:12). Verses 14 and 15 describe the psalmist's reaction to his enemies, and it is one of utter terror. The description of terror is figurative, but emphasizes the physiology of fear. His heart is not strong, but rather like melted wax. His mouth is dry with fear, dry like a *potsherd*, and thus his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. Dust (*the dust of death*) is associated with death because humans are created from the dust of the ground and the breath of God (Gen. 2:7), and at death the breath returns to God and the dust returns to the ground (Eccl. 12:7).

First bulls, then lions; now the psalmist compares his enemies to *dogs*, again dangerous animals. In ancient Israel, the dog was not considered 'man's best friend', but a beast who runs around scavenging what it can, even corpses if they are available (1 Kgs 14:11; 16:4; 21:23–24; 2 Kgs 9:10, 36). The dogs are a pack of villains who encircle the psalmist like a pack of dogs might encircle a potential target of attack, waiting for the right moment to spring into action. Verse 16c is difficult and unclear. The Hebrew text (MT) has 'like a lion at my hands and feet'. The verse would then say that they surround him like dogs and encircle him like lions. Most versions change this to a verb of some sort. The most obvious verb would be one that means 'to dig', but since this does not fit

the context, the meaning is extended to mean ‘to pierce’ (as in NIV, following the Septuagint), although many feel this extends the meaning beyond that permitted by the Hebrew verb. Lately, support has been growing for the verb ‘shrivel’ (listed as *kāra*‘ V in *DCH*), thus producing NRSV’s ‘my hands and feet have shrivelled’.^[45] The New Testament (see *Meaning*) takes its understanding of the verse from the Septuagint.

Hunger is presumably what puts his bones on display as they stick out under his skin (Job 33:21). Rather than pity him or help him, people just stare and gloat and try to benefit from his impending death by dividing up his clothing.

22:19–21. *Come close*

The psalmist now renews his plea for help and asks God to come to him quickly in his distress. He sees God as the only resource that can help him with his enemies who come at him with the sword. Again, he refers to his enemies as *dogs* (v. 20b; cf. v. 16), *lions* (v. 21a; cf. v. 13) and *oxen* (21b; cf. v. 12).

22:22–31. *I will praise you*

As is typical in most, but not all, laments, the psalmist concludes with a declaration of praise and confidence that God will hear and act on his prayer. He first promises to praise God himself, and also publicly, in the context of corporate worship (v. 22). He then calls on his fellow Israelites to join in the praise (v. 23). The reason for praise is that God has heard and made his presence known (*not hidden his face*) to his suffering supplicant. Until now, the psalmist has complained about God being distant. Perhaps the psalm itself was composed after God did respond, or perhaps this praise is expressed in the context of confidence that he will respond and help. In either case, the psalmist does not end in a quandary, but rather he has confidence that his God is a God who saves.

In verse 25, the psalmist declares that he will fulfil his vows. Vows are promises undertaken on condition that God will answer a plea for help. Perhaps the vow included donations of food or resources for the poor, which would explain why they will *eat and be satisfied*.

According to verse 27, praise for God will extend beyond Israel to include all nations. The phrase, *all the families (mišpāḥôt) of the nations*, evokes the similar ‘peoples [*mišpāḥôt*; lit. families] on earth’ of Genesis 12:3, where God promised Abraham that he would bless not only Abraham and his descendants (Israel), but all the peoples of the earth. The psalmist here envisions even the nations (*gôyîm*) turning to God in praise. Why? Because he is King not just of Israel, but of the whole world (he has *dominion and rules over the nations*).

All – both rich and poor – will worship him, even those so poor that they do not have the resources to stay alive. And even more wonderful is the fact that it will not just be the present generation, but generations to come, who will hear about God's saving activity.

Meaning

Psalm 22 is a psalm of lament by a person who does not feel the presence of God in the midst of suffering, but rather experiences fear in the face of persecution by enemies. The well-known Christological sense of the psalm (see below) should not distract us from the fact that the psalm is not a prophecy, but rather a lament which may be a model prayer for worshippers today who can use this psalm to call on God to make himself present in the midst of pain. The confidence and joy expressed at the end can impart hope, as the psalmist moves towards God rather than staying mired in disappointment.

Jesus experienced a similar situation when he was attacked by those who hated him, and so he and the Gospel writers used the psalm to articulate his feelings and the events surrounding his crucifixion. First, 22:18 is cited (Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; John 19:24) or alluded to (Luke 23:34) in reference to the soldiers who divided the clothes of the condemned Jesus among themselves. He experienced the taunts and saw the derisive shaking of heads of those who passed by the cross (Matt. 27:39; Mark 15:29; Luke 23:35, referencing 22:7–8). Jesus expressed his feeling of divine abandonment by uttering the first verse of Psalm 22 (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). The Father loved the Son, but sacrificed himself by withdrawing his special presence from him, so the Son could experience the full force of the meaninglessness of the fallen world. He became a curse in order to redeem us 'from the curse of the law' (Gal. 3:13). These actual quotations from the first part of Psalm 22 demonstrate that Jesus and the Gospel writers saw how closely this psalm reflects Jesus' sufferings and death. The psalm ends with praise. For the psalmist, the praise arises because God rescued him from death. Jesus died, but God rescued him by raising him from the dead. Thus Hebrews 2:11–12 quotes Psalm 22:22 which has Jesus announce,

I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises.

Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd

Context

Psalm 23 is a song of confidence or trust in the Lord. The psalmist expresses trust in the midst of attack (note the enemies in v. 5b). Traditionally, this psalm has been taken as comfort for those who are nearing death. This specific application arose from the translation of verses 4a–b as: ‘Even though I walk through the shadow of death’, and verse 6c as: ‘I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.’ These renderings are now considered doubtful, with the result that Psalm 23 has a much broader application to all who suffer difficulties in life. Of course, those difficulties include sickness and death, so the psalm is still rightly encouraging to those who struggle with their mortality.

The opening metaphor of the psalm describes God as shepherd and the psalmist as one of his sheep. As noted in the *Comment* section, the metaphor is more than pastoral; it is also royal. God is the royal shepherd who cares for his people. The psalmist expresses this relationship in an intensely personal and intimate manner. God is a shepherd to him, and, as such, protects and guides the psalmist on the *right paths* (v. 3b). The second part of the psalm introduces a new metaphor: God as host of a banquet at which the psalmist is an honoured guest. The host metaphor may not completely interrupt the shepherd metaphor, since God the shepherd could be hosting the banquet, although the psalmist is now treated as a human guest, not an animal. The interpretation below will suggest that the personification of God’s goodness and love in verse 6 should be read in the light of the shepherd image.

The psalm’s title associates it with David, who, of course, was a shepherd as a young man (1 Sam. 16:11) and was also called to shepherd the people of Israel as their king (2 Sam. 5:2).

Comment

23:1–4. The Lord is my shepherd

Psalm 23 opens with perhaps the most well-known and well-loved words in the book: *The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing*. The shepherd metaphor is then developed in the following three verses.

The metaphor of God as shepherd is by no means unique to this psalm (e.g.

Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Pss 28:9; 80:1; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:15; Mic. 7:14). God as shepherd is primarily a pastoral metaphor, but it should be borne in mind that, throughout the Ancient Near East, kings and other leaders were styled as shepherds of their people. In the Old Testament as well, the king was the shepherd of his people. Most often, this metaphor was used in a negative sense of Israel's leaders. They were shepherds who led their sheep astray (e.g. Ezek. 34), but David responded well, though not perfectly, to God's command that he shepherd God's people (2 Sam. 5:2). The extensive use of the shepherd metaphor for leaders reveals that Psalm 23 is a royal psalm. The psalmist expresses confidence in the Lord (Yahweh), the shepherd-king.

The psalmist unpacks the metaphor of God as shepherd in the next verses, confessing that, with God as shepherd, he will lack nothing. As the shepherd supplies all the needs of his sheep, so God supplies all the needs of his people. Verses 2–3 contain four poetic cola, each one describing something the shepherd does on behalf of his sheep. Verse 2 describes the idyllic life of the sheep as the shepherd leads them to green pastures where they can feed, and also beside quiet waters where they can drink. The poet masterfully evokes a mental image of beauty and calm. He breaks from the shepherd-sheep metaphor briefly in the first colon of verse 3 (*he refreshes my soul*). The psalmist finds refreshment in the guidance and provision of God. The final colon in the series again emphasizes God the shepherd's guidance of his sheep. It has been debated whether the proper understanding of the paths in which God guides his sheep are 'paths of righteousness' or *right paths* (NIV), in the sense of correct or straight paths. In either case, the metaphor of the path is well known from wisdom literature, particularly Proverbs, where the path stands for one's life journey. According to wisdom, there are two possible paths (Prov. 4:26; 5:21): the straight path that leads to life, and the crooked path that leads to death. Whether *right paths* or 'paths of righteousness', the paths along which God the shepherd leads his sheep are clearly the former. God, like the father in Proverbs, guides his people in paths where they will act with justice and integrity, and this path will lead them to life. Verse 3b ends with a motive clause (*for his name's sake*). God functions as the shepherd of his people for the glory of his own name.

Verse 4 envisions God's guidance through a time of utmost distress. Continuing the path metaphor, the psalmist imagines the path leading through *the darkest valley* or, according to another translation, 'the valley of the shadow of death'. The latter more traditional rendering derives from splitting the Hebrew word *šalmāwet* (deep darkness) into two words: *šēl māwet* (shadow of death). The former rendering has been considered more likely, however, since a cognate word was found at Ugarit. The traditional rendering continues, though, because

the psalm is often used to console those who are nearing death. Of course, the translation ‘darkest valley’ simply broadens its application, certainly not excluding the difficult time of facing death (Futato 2009: 101).

The rest of verse 4 makes it clear where the psalmist finds confidence in the midst of his trouble, namely in the intimate presence of God. He does not fear evil because *you are with me*, a promise God makes in his covenant relationship with Israel. Returning to the shepherd metaphor by means of the metonymy of the rod and staff, the psalmist ends the first stanza by reaffirming God’s comfort in the midst of his trouble. The rod and the staff are implements that the shepherd uses to fend off predators and to goad the sheep in the right direction and towards provision.

23:5–6. *The Lord is my host*

The second stanza shifts its focus from the shepherd metaphor to the host metaphor. Of course, it is not at all impossible that the host here is the shepherd, but neither is such continuity necessary for the poet to make the point that God not only provides what is necessary, but provides in abundance.

God, the host, generously treats the psalmist as his guest. He prepares food for him,⁴⁶ anoints his head with refreshing oil to wipe away the dust and grime, and fills his cup to overflowing. The preparation of the *table* reminds the reader of the image of Woman Wisdom preparing a feast for those who accept her invitation to dine (Prov. 9:1–6). Eating with someone implies entering into an intimate relationship with them. The overflowing cup connects with the theme of the cup of blessing or salvation (Pss 16:5; 116:13; 1 Cor. 10:16), the opposite of the cup of judgment (Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15–16; Ezek. 23:31–34; Mark 14:36). God treats the psalmist as his honoured guest *in the presence of my enemies* (23:5). Although trouble had been hinted at in verse 4, verse 5 mentions enemies for the first time. Thus, we discover that the psalmist expresses confidence in God not during a moment of tranquility, but rather when being pressed by enemies. Through his presence and provision, God demonstrates to the enemies whose side he is on.

Verse 6a personifies God’s covenant attributes of *goodness* (*tôb*) and *love* or *loyalty* (*hesed*), picturing them as following the psalmist. A better translation of the verb might be ‘pursuing’, and if so, and if the shepherd metaphor does extend into the second stanza, then goodness and love act like the shepherd’s sheepdogs, helping the shepherd to keep the sheep going in the right direction.

The NIV renders the final colon of the psalm: *I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever*. The house of the Lord, of course, is the temple, and no-one

actually lived there. The temple, though, was where God made his presence known among his people. The psalmist thus proclaims that he will live in the light of God's presence.

The translation *for ever* gives a wrong impression, at least when the psalm is read in its original Old Testament context. The phrase is literally rendered 'for length of days', that is, for the duration of the psalmist's life. After all, the teaching about the afterlife developed during the late Old Testament (Dan. 12:1–3) into the intertestamental period and blossomed in the New Testament. Reading Psalm 23 in the light of the New Testament indicates that it is true that the psalmist and others who put their trust in God will live in his presence forever.

Meaning

Psalm 23 has rightly found its place in the hearts of Christian readers. Praying the psalm helps one to express trust in God and to experience calm in the midst of life's troubles, including imminent death.

Christians cannot read Psalm 23 that explores God as shepherd of his people without thinking of Jesus Christ. After all, Jesus himself announced to his disciples, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11). Indeed, Jesus died on the cross to save his people from their guilt, sin and even death. He is the ultimate comfort in life and in death, and just like a shepherd, Jesus comforts his people by revealing, 'I know my sheep and my sheep know me' (John 10:14; see also Luke 15:4–7).⁴⁷

Psalm 24. Lift up your heads, you gates

Context

Psalm 24 is a hymn of praise to God, who is celebrated as the *King of glory* (vv. 7–10) in what appears to be a liturgical interchange between two priests. Below, we will suggest that the final stanza (vv. 7–10) describes a dialogue between a priest attending the ark of the covenant at the head of the victorious Israelite army as it returns to the sanctuary in Jerusalem and a priest at the gates of Jerusalem or the temple precincts. Thus, the psalm praises God the Warrior who has given his people victory over their enemies. This final celebrative stanza is preceded by an entrance liturgy asking who can enter the holy place and, before that, an affirmation of the authority of God as the Creator of everything and everybody.

The psalm's title associates it with David, the king. If one takes the title as ascribing composition of the psalm to David, a minor problem arises in the reference to the *mountain of the LORD* as the location of the *holy place* (v. 3), since such would most naturally be understood as a reference to the temple on Mount Zion, which was not constructed until after David's death. Of course, David did bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6; 1 Chr. 15) and placed it in a tent, perhaps on Zion, although this is not certain. We also know, according to 1 Chronicles, that David expended considerable energy preparing for the building and organization of temple worship.

Comment

24:1–2. *God the Creator*

The psalmist begins with a hearty affirmation that everything, animate and inanimate, belongs to the Lord. He owns everything and everyone, and everything and everyone are completely dependent on him. After all, according to the psalmist in verse 2, God created everything and everyone. He thus has authority over all.

The earth was created by placing it on the primordial waters. While it is debated whether or not Genesis 1 assumes the existence of the waters when God began his acts of creation (implied in the translation of Gen. 1:1–2 in the NRSV) or whether the text describes the creation of the waters from nothing (so the NIV),

here the waters are pre-existent, and the creative act is the founding of the land. Contrary to ancient Mesopotamian creation accounts (Walton 2009 and 2011), though, there is not a hint of conflict between the Lord and the sea in the description of creation (but see Ps. 74:13–17).

24:3–6. *Who can enter the holy place?*

The psalmist then pointedly asks who can enter the holy space, particularly the sanctuary. Like Psalm 15, this section of Psalm 24 is essentially an ‘entrance liturgy’ to the sanctuary. The *mountain of the LORD* is a reference to Zion on which the temple was built, and access was restricted to those who had a right relationship with God.

The sanctuary was not an open, public space. The Levites were charged with protecting it from violation, and indeed one group of Levites was specifically designated as gatekeepers (1 Chr. 26:1–19). As in Psalm 15, the psalmist answers his own question by citing certain qualifications for entry, beginning with the general statement that one must have *clean hands* and a *pure heart*. In other words, worshippers who wish to enter the sanctuary must be innocent both inside and outside. They must be innocent in their actions and their minds, including their motives. For the psalmist, right action and thinking would be defined by the law in general, but verse 4 goes on to specify two criteria for entry. It is debated, however, exactly to what these criteria refer. The NIV represents one approach, understanding the psalmist to refer to false worship. The person who is allowed entry into the holy place must not worship an idol or offer oaths in the name of a false god. Others (see the NET Bible) render the verse as referring to more general integrity (‘who does not lie, or make promises with no intention of keeping them’). The issue is how to understand the Hebrew words *šāw’* in verse 4c and *mirmâ* in verse 4d. The literal rendering of the former is ‘worthless’ or ‘lie’, but it is sometimes used of idols, in the sense of a ‘worthless object’ (Ps. 31:6; Jon. 2:8). On the other hand, the latter term is not used anywhere else to refer to false gods, which thus strengthens the case for the type of translation offered by the NET Bible.

Although the psalmist expresses stringent ethical theological qualifications for entry into the sanctuary, ‘the liturgy is not so much a self-righteous declaration of innocence as it is a solemn admission of dependence on the merciful grace of God’ (Wilson 2002: 450). Indeed, one who does not have clean hands or a pure heart can restore relationship with God by sincere repentance and the offering of atoning sacrifices.

Verses 5–6 describe the benefits that come to those who pass the test and can

proceed to the holy place. God blesses and vindicates them. The best description of God's blessing is found, for example, in Deuteronomy 27 – 28, where the curses and blessings of the covenant are listed. The blessings come on those who are obedient to the law of God, an idea similar to what we find in this psalm. The blessings presuppose a harmonious relationship with God, and the psalmist goes on to state that the blessed one will have a harmonious relationship with other people of God and will enjoy material prosperity, large happy families and victory in warfare. Such blessing will characterize those who *seek your face, God of Jacob* (the NIV here follows the Septuagint by adding 'God of', which may be suggested by v. 5). The idiom of the 'face of God' refers to God's intimate presence, which at the time of the psalm was encountered most dramatically in the sanctuary where God chose to make his presence manifest.

24:7–10. *Lift up your heads, you gates!*

The final stanza contains a liturgical interchange between two unidentified persons. We must reconstruct the scene based on the content of their words. The first voice requests that the gates be opened to allow the *King of glory* to enter. The King of glory is obviously God. The request to open the gates is stated in what appears to be a poetic personification of the gates that they 'lift up' their heads. Since ancient gates swung open to the side and did not rise up like a medieval castle's gate over a moat (which would close it), we take this as a figurative, not a literal, description. In the Bible, the idiom of 'lifting one's head' (Gen. 40:13; Ps. 110:7; Luke 21:28) denotes joy and celebration. The gates could be those of the city of Jerusalem or perhaps the gates that led into the temple precincts, but in any case, the King of glory seeks entrance. While the first voice requests entrance, the second voice asks for identification: *Who is this King of glory?* As we explore the scene further, we will realize that the questioner knows full well who the King of glory is. However, the question allows for more praise, as the first speaker calls back, *The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle*. This answer associates God with warfare and permits us to recognize the scene more precisely. The most likely scenario is that the army of Israel has returned from a successful battle against the enemy. When obedient Israel warred at God's command against their enemies, they would take the ark of the covenant with them as a symbol of his presence as Warrior. Thus, as they return after the victory, the priests leading the way and carrying the ark would ask entry of a priest who was on the walls to open up the gates so they could return. God has manifested his glory in battle. He is the Lord Almighty, which is more literally translated 'LORD of Hosts', the hosts being his army.

Meaning

The different parts of Psalm 24 at first seem only loosely connected to each other, opening with an affirmation of God's authority as Creator of everything and everyone, moving to an entrance liturgy that asks who can enter the holy place and receive God's blessing, and ending with a liturgical interchange between a priest at the head of the returning army and a priest manning the gates of the city or the temple. Stepping back to reconsider the whole, however, allows us to identify more coherence than is possible at first glance. Certainly, the entrance liturgy makes sense as a prelude to the return of the ark ultimately to the sanctuary, where it stays until it is taken out again with the army. The opening description of God's authority, then, is a fitting prelude to the whole, particularly as God's establishment of the earth as founded on the sea, which in the Bible often represents chaos. God is in control of both cosmic chaos as well as the chaos represented by those enemies who resist his rule.

Thus, the setting of the psalm is the aftermath of divinely commanded warfare in which God was seen as the One providing the victory over the enemy (see Deut. 20 for the principle of Yahweh war). How is such a psalm to be appropriated in Christian worship? Christians too are engaged in warfare, not against flesh-and-blood enemies, but 'against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12). Psalm 24 encourages Christian readers that their God continues to fight for them in the midst of the turmoil of life. They also wait in hope for the future reappearance of their Warrior, Jesus Christ, who will bring all evil, human and spiritual, to an end (Rev. 19:11–21).

Psalm 25. Trust in the midst of suffering

Context

In the final analysis, Psalm 25 is a lament of an individual, although the complaint is expressed in the context of such strong statements of trust in God that one is tempted to consider it a psalm of confidence. In some psalms (e.g. Ps. 77), the composer attempts to prod God into action by accusing him of not following through on his covenantal promises. In Psalm 25, the supplicant challenges God to live up to the psalmist's feeling of trust, to follow through and save him from his enemies. The psalmist recognizes that he is a sinner, but counts on God to treat him with grace (*mercy and love*, v. 6a). As the exposition of the content will point out, the psalm also has wisdom elements, most notably in his request for God to instruct him in his paths/ways (v. 4). The psalm is an acrostic, in which the poetic units begin with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, from *aleph* to *taw* (two lines begin with *resh*, vv. 18 and 19). Verse 21 actually completes the acrostic, which raises questions about the final verse of the poem (v. 22). In addition, while the psalm up to this point has been an individual lament, verse 22 calls for the rescue of the community (Israel). These factors lend support to the idea that verse 22 is a later addition to the original poem (perhaps even signalled by the fact that v. 22 begins with the Hebrew letter *pe*, since the acrostic poem in Ps. 34 also ends with a *pe* line), allowing its use in the context of a corporate calamity. The title indicates that David is the author, meaning that the individual is the king and thus could be seen as a representative of the community.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

25:1–3. *I trust you*

The psalmist does not begin with a plea for help, but rather utters a statement of his trust in God. The first verse is a simple statement of the psalmist's confidence in God. The NIV's *I put my trust* is more literally rendered 'I lift up my soul' (NRSV), giving the idea that the psalmist feels comfortable turning his life over to God ('I give my life to you', NLT), as troubled as it is, as we will soon learn. Verse 2 then uses the verb more typically translated as 'trust' (*bṭh*). All this

comes before his first petition to God to keep him from *shame*, presumably from his *enemies* who would *triumph* over him if they succeeded. Biblical Israel was an honour and shame society, in which ‘honor refers to the experience of being esteemed by one’s group or other social entities on the basis of embodying that which is deemed desirable, virtuous and socially productive. Shame refers, generally, to the opposite experience of being devalued and belittled on the basis of failing to measure up to or transgressing the same’ (deSilva 2008: 287). To be shamed publicly has negative connotations. According to Pemberton, ‘to be “put to shame” means the loss of social position which negatively affects every familial relationship and business interaction. For an enemy to take honor (status) at the psalmist’s expense is no small matter in a society with foundations built on the bedrock of honor and shame’ (Pemberton 2012: 81). Since the psalms are intentionally non-specific, we don’t know precisely how his enemies are trying to devalue him, but we do know the standard by which he would judge his worth, namely righteous living (see e.g. Ps. 15). Psalm 24 may give us a shorthand answer: ‘The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god’ (v. 4). Such an attitude and behaviour would win the praise of the community of the faithful. The psalmist’s present situation is problematic, however, because his enemies, who are *treacherous* (v. 3d), are trying to shame him, although he is one who hopes in God. He calls on God to assert proper order by having shame come on those who are trying to shame him (v. 3c–d).

25:4–7. *Teach me your ways*

The second stanza contains four further requests directed to God. The first is couched in language familiar to us from wisdom literature, particularly the book of Proverbs. Proverbs talks about two ways: the first of the *ways* (or *paths*) is the righteous, godly, wise path, and the second is the path of the wicked, ungodly, foolish person (Longman 2006: 59–60). The psalmist wants to be on God’s path, which Proverbs teaches leads to life and not death. He wants to grow in his knowledge of God and his truth, because that is his *hope* in life. He knows that those who walk on God’s path will be blessed, while those who do not will be punished (see Ps. 1).

The psalmist desires that God *remember* him not based on his previous sins, but rather through the prism of his *mercy* (*reḥem*) and *love* (*ḥesed*), qualities attributed to God in Exodus 34:6–7. Remembrance is more than a cognitive act; it implies an action. He appeals to God to remember him according to his (God’s) goodness (*you...are good* [ṭôb]). Here the psalmist acknowledges his

failure, but as something of the past. His appeal to God implies that he has turned from those sins, and his desire to know God's path indicates an intention to sin no more. Although he has not yet explicitly mentioned the covenant (v. 10), mercy and love are divine qualities closely connected to the covenant, in which God promises to be in relationship with his people, to grant them his mercy and love and to be good to them.

25:8–11. *God is good*

The third stanza begins by expanding upon the attribution of goodness to God at the end of the previous stanza (v. 7d). Motivated by his goodness and virtue (*upright*), God teaches *sinner*s, among whom the psalmist counts himself (v. 11b), his ways. God's instruction is directed towards the *humble*. Here we have another concern of the book of Proverbs. Pride stands in the way of instruction; humility makes a person open to listening to God. Those who think they know it all will not listen to correction, but the humble will allow themselves to be guided (Prov. 3:3, 5, 7; 15:33; 21:24; 29:23). In verse 10, we have the first explicit mention of the covenant, here specifically the *demands of the covenant*. The word 'covenant' (*bĕrît*) rarely occurs in the book of Psalms, although the book as a whole can be described as covenantal (see Introduction: Theology, p. 47). Most covenants come with demands, but the Mosaic covenant and its laws are probably in view here. God's ways are *loving* (*hesed*) and *faithful* (*'emet*) to those who keep the law. The stanza closes with an appeal to God to forgive the sins of the psalmist (reading the perfect of *slĥ* as precativ). The appeal is not based on anything in the psalmist, but rather on God's reputation (*name*).

25:12–15. *God blesses the righteous*

In the fourth stanza, the poet uses yet another concept well known from wisdom literature and particularly Proverbs: the *fear of the LORD*. Most notable is the phrase in the prologue to the book: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge' (1:7). To fear God is to recognize that one is not the centre of the universe. The fear of God engenders proper humility in a person that makes them teachable. This fear is not an emotion that makes one run away, but rather to persist in God's awesome presence and to listen to his instructions. He instructs them because they are willing to learn. For that reason, God *confides* in them and makes his *covenant known to them*, and the result is that they will be rewarded. Interestingly, the psalmist specifies the reward as the inheritance of the *land*. A similar thought is found at the end of Proverbs 2:

Thus you will walk in the ways of the good
and keep to the paths of the righteous.
For the upright will live in the land,
and the blameless will remain in it;
but the wicked will be cut off from the land,
and the unfaithful will be torn from it.
(vv. 20–22)

Only by listening to God and obeying him (*my eyes are ever on the LORD*) will he avoid the pitfalls of life (*the snare*).

25:16–21. *Help me, Lord*

The final stanza consists of a series of petitions that presume the psalmist's present troubled condition, but also expose the hope that God will resolve his problems. He wants to experience God's gracious presence, since he feels *lonely* and in pain (v. 18). He asks God to rid him of his anxiety (*troubles of my heart/my anguish*, v. 17). He once again asks to be forgiven for his sins (v. 18; see also vv. 7, 11), and here he appeals to God to do so because of his suffering (v. 18a) and the persecution of his enemies (v. 19). He asks for protection and again an avoidance of shame (see vv. 2–3), based on the fact that he has sought protection from God. He puts his hope in God for his protection (v. 21). The *integrity* and *uprightness* that will protect him must be God's and not his own. After all, he has proclaimed God upright earlier (v. 8a) and has confessed his sins rather than professed his own innocence.

25:22. *Deliver Israel*

Interestingly, the final appeal is not in the first-person singular, but rather for all of *Israel*. Perhaps this is a later addition to the psalm to make it a corporate lament, a view supported by the fact that this verse is an addition to a complete acrostic found in verses 1–21 (see *Context*). If so, the justification could be that it is known as a psalm of David (see title), who, as king, would be representative of the whole nation.

Meaning

This prayer is a model for those who suffer, particularly at the hands of others, to call on God to help them. It expresses a fundamental trust that God will indeed answer the prayer, in spite of the supplicant's acknowledgment of sin. It speaks of an eagerness to learn more from God and to grow in relationship with him, based on the covenant.

The psalmist's call to God to remember him in spite of his sin on the basis of

God's mercy and love resonates with Christians, who know that they are sinners, but that Jesus Christ has taken their sins on himself and died to suffer the consequences on their behalf.

Like the psalmist, the Christian too experiences attacks by enemies. In the book of Philippians, Paul writes to those who were being persecuted and tells them not to be 'frightened in any way by those who oppose you' (1:28), but rather to 'conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (1:27). They should consider the struggle a privilege because they suffer for Christ (v. 29), and 'stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel' (v. 27).

Psalm 26. I have led a blameless life

Context

Psalm 26, like Psalm 25, is a lament, but whereas in the previous psalm the composer acknowledged his sin, in Psalm 26 he appeals to God to rescue him from his enemies because of his innocence. Not all suffering, after all, is the result of sin, a lesson learned from the book of Job, and Psalm 26 provides a model prayer for those who suffer without cause. Other psalms share the same basis for vindication, namely the innocence of the sufferer (Pss 7, 17, 139), who often, as in this psalm, calls on God to test him and examine his heart. The title indicates that the psalm was composed by David. While David certainly was subject to undeserved suffering at the hands of his enemies (Saul and Absalom, for example), there is nothing uniquely Davidic in the poem. As will be highlighted in the *Comment* section, the psalmist's disavowal of wickedness and assertion of righteousness in connection with his presence in the sanctuary bear similarity to the so-called entrance liturgies (Pss 15, 24).

Comment

26:1–3. *Vindicate me*

The psalmist opens with an appeal to God to *vindicate* him, which presumes some charge of wrongdoing. The language is that of a court of law, but whether that should be taken literally or metaphorically, or both, cannot be stated with certainty. Perhaps, like Job, the need for vindication does not arise from a formal legal charge, but rather from the psalmist's suffering, which is taken as some kind of punishment for a presumed sin. In either case, and again like Job, the psalmist's defence is his *blameless life* (v. 1). He asks God to *test* him and *try* him, to *examine* his *heart*, in essence to put him on trial. He requests this with full confidence that he will be exonerated, because he has trusted God resolutely (v. 1b) and has lived in accordance with God's *unfailing love* (*hesed*) and *faithfulness* (*'emet*), words associated with God's covenant with his people.

26:4–7. *I am innocent*

The psalmist now provides details about his blameless life (v. 1b). In verses 4–5 he dissociates himself from evil people and their actions, and in verses 6–7 he

lists his righteous behaviour. Psalm 1:1 blesses the person who does not walk, stand or sit with the wicked. Here the psalmist twice (vv. 4a and 5b, forming a kind of inclusio of this brief subsection) uses the metaphor of sitting with the wicked, the most intense form of association, since it takes a lot more energy to break away from someone with whom one sits. In the middle cola (vv. 4b and 5a), he also rejects association with evil people.

Rather than cavorting with evil people, the psalmist associates with the righteous who congregate at the sanctuary. At the holy place, he praises God and testifies to God's wonderful deeds.

This section of the psalm bears relationship to liturgies of entrance into the holy place, where those 'who may dwell in your [God's] sacred tent' (15:1) are described as the ones who distance themselves from evil (15:2–5).

26:8–11. Preserve my life

Verse 8 is closely connected to verses 6–7 and perhaps should be considered part of that stanza, but, in any case, here the psalmist proclaims his love of God's *house*, a reference to the sanctuary (tabernacle/temple) where God makes his manifest presence (his *glory*) known. This leads to a final appeal for help and one in which the psalmist sounds most desperate. He sees that his fate is tied to God's decision, and the consequences are dire. He has dissociated himself from wicked people and asserted his blamelessness in order to avoid the fate of the wicked.

26:12. Thank you, God

At the end, the psalmist again asserts the stability of his life. He has not faltered (v. 1d), but rather stands solidly on level ground. He intends to continue to praise God in the public place of worship.

Meaning

This psalm, like all the laments that declare innocence, is often hard for modern readers to appropriate in the light of the strong New Testament teaching on human depravity. Of course, this New Testament teaching is also taught in the Old Testament, which can be observed from the fact that Paul's most explicit teaching on humanity's sinful condition is based on quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah (see Rom. 3:9–20). That said, although everyone is a sinner, people are nevertheless victims of life's pain that they don't deserve, and this psalm is particularly relevant for such situations.

Of course, Jesus is the one truly innocent man, who suffers not for his own

sin, but for ours. Reading the psalm as a prayer of Jesus (see Introduction, p. 49), he did indeed lead a blameless life and suffered at the hands of wicked people. While he did associate with wicked people ('It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill', Matt. 9:12–13), he did not participate in their activities. He 'loved the house where you [God] live, the place where your glory dwells' (v. 8), as witnessed by the cleansing of the temple (John 2:13–25), but he himself is the very presence of God, rendering the temple redundant.

Psalm 27. The Lord is my light and my salvation

Context

Like Psalm 25, Psalm 27 is a lament with a strong undercurrent of trust that God will take care of the psalmist when trouble comes. The tone is confident, not desperate, but still, the psalmist is aware that he is in danger and needs God's presence and guidance to weather the storm. Like Psalm 26 (and, as we will see, Ps. 28 as well), the psalmist in 27 expresses a strong desire to be in God's house, the place where God makes his presence palpable for his people.

Comment

27:1. Whom shall I fear?

The psalmist begins his prayer with a strong statement of confidence in God's ability to care for him. God is his *light*, the significance of which must be understood in contrast to the darkness. In the beginning was darkness, and the creation process began by God saying, 'Let there be light' (Gen. 1:3). Darkness is often associated with disorder, confusion and eventually evil (Pss 18:28; 44:19; 74:20; 82:5). Wicked deeds are done in the dark, and the light exposes them (Job 38:12–16). In addition, God is his *salvation*, here indicating his belief and hope that God can rescue him from the distresses of life to which he will refer below. The Lord is also his *stronghold*, a fortress that provides protection against the assaults of the enemy. These affirmations are made in the context of two opening rhetorical questions, the point being that, since God is his light, his salvation and his stronghold, he should fear nothing and no-one.

27:2–3. The enemy will not prevail

The psalmist then imagines two related scenarios of assault. These are stated more as principles rather than an actual situation that he is facing, although that is also possible, especially in the light of his later appeal for help against his enemies in verse 12. The first scenario is an attack by the *wicked* who want to *devour* him. The NIV footnote suggests an alternate rendering of 'slander me' (for the Hebrew idiom [ʾēkōl bēšārî] for *devour me* since 'kl is used that way in the Aramaic in Daniel [3:8; 6:24 (25)]). In either case, the wicked assault the psalmist, but he points out that because of God they will be defeated, not him.

Verse 3 presents a more vivid scenario and envisions an *army* attacking the psalmist. At this point, we should remember that David is the putative author. As king of Israel, he would be subject to such attacks. However, even so, he would not fear because God is his light, salvation and stronghold (v. 1). At this stage of the psalm, though, we are not to understand these scenarios as describing an immediate or present crisis.

27:4–5. *Safe in his dwelling*

The psalmist begins the new stanza by stating that he has *one* request of God, and the rest of the section will explicate that request. Later stanzas will have other requests of God, so here we should understand the reference to one request to mean that this is his most important one: that *I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life*. In other words, he desires to be in the very presence of God, since the house is a reference to the sanctuary, the *temple* ⁴⁸ (v. 4f). The temple displays God's *beauty*. So it is not the building, but rather God himself who is the object of his attention and focus. A similar sentiment concludes Psalm 23 (see v. 6), and is also the focus of the entirety of Psalm 84, which begins, 'How lovely is your dwelling-place, LORD Almighty!'

Verse 5 goes on to express the psalmist's motive in wanting to be in God's presence. God will keep him *safe* when trouble comes. The temple is a *shelter* from the chaos of the world in which the psalmist can hide. God's protection is likened to being transported to a *rock*, a secure place, high above the fray (see 18:2).

27:6. *I will praise God who exalts me*

If God grants the psalmist one request to dwell in the house of the Lord (vv. 4–5), then he will triumph over his enemies (*my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me*). While the reference to foes in the earlier part of the psalm seems hypothetical, we begin to see that he is indeed at present facing a challenge. The second parallelism describes how he will act in the sanctuary. He will offer sacrifices and praise.

27:7–10. *Answer me, Lord*

In these verses, the supplicant desperately urges God to be present with him. He seeks an answer to prayer (v. 7). He asks God not to withdraw his presence (*his face*) from him, for God's presence is the desire of his heart (v. 8a) and his determined intention (v. 8b). He needs God (*you have been my helper*) to handle the problems of his life. In verse 10, he expresses his confidence that God will

not abandon him. Indeed, he believes that it is more likely that his *father and mother* would leave him, an unimaginable idea, than that God would desert him.

27:11–12. *False accusations*

Verses 11–12 continue his requests. He begins by asking God to *teach* him his way, language familiar from wisdom literature (cf. Ps. 24:4–5). He needs God to keep him on the straight *path* that leads to life, because his opponents threaten to knock him off it. He needs God to protect him from coming under the control of his enemies who use *malicious accusations* against him. The language could be that of the courtroom, but not necessarily. We could think of Absalom, who falsely represented his father before initiating civil war against him (2 Sam. 15:1–12).

27:13–14. *Wait for the Lord*

The psalm ends on a strong note of trust. Although he faces problems, the psalmist remains *confident* that God will remain good towards him while he yet lives (*in the land of the living*). Thus, he urges his hearers to remain courageous and wait for God to respond (see Josh. 1:7).

Meaning

This prayer is appropriate for those facing difficulties, who know that they need God's help and that God's help is available to them because they are convinced of his goodness towards them and his presence with them. Thus, they can ask and then wait, not in desperation, but with courage.

On reading the first verse (*The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?*), Christian readers naturally think of Jesus, our salvation, who said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12). Indeed, it is in Jesus' presence that we have the type of security that the psalmist longed for in the midst of life's dangers: 'We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:37–39).

Psalm 28. You are my Rock

Context

From the first verse onwards, we can recognize that this prayer is a lament. It is a lament of an individual, but in verse 8b the *anointed one* (the king; note that David is cited as the composer in the title) is mentioned, and then the psalm becomes a corporate lament.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

28:1–2. *I call to my Rock*

The lament begins with an invocation (*LORD*), pleas for help, along with a statement of motivation. The plea is for God to hear the composer's cry for mercy and help, implying trouble from which he needs to be rescued. He fears that God will remain *silent* and not answer his prayer. If that happens, he will die (*go down to the pit*). He appeals to God as his *Rock*, a common metaphor for divine protection (see *Comment* at Ps. 18:2), implying that he is under attack, perhaps by people or some other external force such as an illness. His prayers are directed towards the sanctuary (*your Most Holy Place*), because that is where God makes his presence known to Israel.

28:3–5. *Don't treat me like the wicked*

He beseeches God not to treat him as if he were wicked. That is, he begs God not to punish him with the punishment that the evil people deserve. The latter speak well to their neighbours while they plot evil against them. The book of Proverbs critiques such dissimulating speech:

Silver dross overlying clay,
smooth lips and an evil heart.
Those who hate dissimulate with their lips,
but they set deception aside.
Though their voice is gracious, don't believe them,
for seven abominations are in their heart.
Hatred is covered with guile,
but they reveal their evil in the assembly.

(Prov. 26:23–26)⁴⁹

Verse 4 is an imprecation (see Introduction, pp. 51–52) calling on God to bring retribution on these evil people. They deserve what they get because of the harm they inflict on others (see also Pss 5:10; 56:7; 141:10). The psalmist does not take it on himself to hurt them, but turns his anger over to God. Verse 5 registers his confidence that God will hold them accountable. He uses an architectural metaphor to talk about their destruction. God will *tear them down* and not *build them up* (see Jer. 1:10 for a similar use of this metaphor).

28:6–9. Thank God

Laments typically contain an element of praise and/or confidence, and we find such in verses 6–8. The composer begins by proclaiming God worthy of worship (*Praise be to the LORD*). Why? Because he has heard his cry. Whether this confidence of being heard originates because the psalm was written not in the throes of trouble, but after resolution, or because a priest has assured him of God's attention, or for some other reason, is unclear. Later worshippers, though, who pray this prayer in the midst of their own problems, will find that their attention shifts away from their own issues and towards God in a positive direction. God is the psalmist's protection (*strength* and *shield*, vv. 7a, 8a; *fortress of salvation*, v. 8b).

In verse 8b, the psalmist states that God is a fortress of salvation for his *anointed one* (*māšîaḥ*). Perhaps we are to regard the anointed one as the original speaker of the poem. After all, David is named as the author in the title. If so, we understand how this individual lament suddenly becomes a national plea for help, since the individual is the king who represents all the people and their fate. It is also possible that an original individual lament takes on a more corporate dimension by the later addition of verses 8–9. In any case, the psalm ends with a final appeal for God to rescue and bless his *inheritance*, a not uncommon way to refer to the people of Israel (Deut. 32:8–9; Ps. 33:12; Jer. 10:16; 51:19). The psalmist calls on God to carry Israel out of danger, just as a *shepherd* (Ps. 23) might carry a lame sheep out of trouble.

Meaning

In its final and full form, this lament is a cry either by or for God's anointed king that God would save him as well as the nation. The reference to the anointed is late and subtle in the psalm, so the poem can appropriately and easily be used by any who find themselves in dire straits.

The reference to David in the title and to the anointed one in verse 8b allows a connection with the *Māšîaḥ* (Messiah; Christ). Although Jesus was dragged

away with the wicked and crucified between two prisoners, God heard his cry for help and raised him from the dead. God was a fortress of salvation for his anointed one (v. 8), and thus we can call on him to be our shepherd (John 10:11, 14) and carry us forever.

Psalm 29. Praise the God of the storm

Context

Psalm 29 is a hymn that praises God as the power behind the storm. The power of the storm with its lightning and thunder demonstrates God's strength. A reflection on the relationship between God and the storm leads the psalmist to extol God as King.

Many of the features of this psalm bear resemblance to Ugaritic poetry, raising the question of the relationship between the two. In the first place, the parallelism is highly repetitive, as in Ugaritic poetry. Secondly, the geographical references (*Lebanon*, *Sirion* [Mount Hermon] and *Kadesh*) are all in the north, even beyond the border of Israel. Thirdly, the reference to the *heavenly beings* (*bĕnê 'ēlîm*) is similar to the way in which Ugaritic texts refer to the divine assembly (*bn ilm*). The picture of the Lord enthroned as King *over the flood* (v. 10) is reminiscent of the Ancient Near Eastern mythic idea of the God of creation's defeat of the god of the sea (see commentary). And, finally, the picture of God as the power of the storm evokes a connection with Baal, the storm god and primary deity of Ugarit (Canaan).

These connections suggest that there is an intentional link between Psalm 29 and Ugaritic/Canaanite religion. Some scholars have even concluded that Psalm 29 is an original Canaanite hymn in which the Israelite hymn writer has simply substituted the name Yahweh for Baal.⁵⁰ Perhaps this view is correct; otherwise, the composer has constructed his poem intentionally using these Canaanite devices and imagery. But for what purpose? The best explanation is that the Hebrew poet is stating that it is Yahweh, and not Baal, who is the power of the storm. In other words, the purpose would be polemical or apologetic, appealing to those Israelites who were tempted to worship Baal as the provider of the storm and the one who controlled the chaos waters.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

29:1–2. Ascribe to the Lord

The poem begins with a four-part parallelism that repeats the opening phrase (*ascribe to the LORD*) three times before substituting a slight variation in the

fourth (*worship the LORD*). This long, repetitive parallelism is typical of Ugaritic poetry (see *Context*); it also immediately identifies the psalm as a hymn of praise. Interestingly, the call to worship is directed not to the human congregation but to the *heavenly beings* (*bēnê ’ēlīm*, lit. ‘sons of God’), again reminiscent of Ugaritic poetry where the ‘sons of god/El’ are the multitude of gods who compose the divine assembly. In an Israelite context, these gods are created spiritual beings, who are called angels in other contexts. They are urged to attribute *strength*, *glory* and *holiness* to God.

29:3–9. God’s voice

The body of the psalm describes the Lord as the power of the storm. God’s *voice* is the thunder. God and his voice over *the* [many] *waters* evoke the memory of the conflict between the Creator God and the waters of chaos typically connected to the god of the sea (Yamm; Tiamat or Apsu) in Ancient Near Eastern mythology. God’s voice, indeed God himself, dominates the waters that represent chaos (Pss 18:4; 46:2–3; 69:1, 2). God’s voice is so powerful that it even shakes the majestic and famous *cedars of Lebanon*, well known from both biblical (1 Kgs 5:6; Ps. 104:16; Isa. 2:13) and Ancient Near Eastern (*Epic of Gilgamesh*) references. The region of Lebanon, plus its famous southern mountain, *Sirion*, also known as Hermon, is not stationary when God’s storm hits, but jumps like a *calf* or a *wild ox*. As in a typical storm, the thunder is accompanied by *lightning*, which shakes the *Desert of Kadesh*, another northern location (see *Context*). Verse 9 may be read one of two ways, either way again indicating the power of the storm that represents God. Perhaps, as the NIV translation indicates, God’s storm twists the mighty oak tree, or else the unsettling thunder and lightning make the deer give (premature) birth (see NIV footnote). Such a demonstration of power leads his worshippers in the temple to give God the *glory* (v. 9c).

29:10–11. God the King

Verse 10 suggests yet another well-known Ancient Near Eastern mythological theme: the enthronement of God over the waters (*the flood*). In the Babylonian creation story (*Enuma Elish*), when the god Ea defeats Apsu, the god of the salt waters, he sets his throne on top of his watery body. But this Israelite psalm claims that it is Yahweh, not Ea or any other Ancient Near Eastern god, who has dominance over the forces of chaos. Yahweh alone is *King*. And it is this God who gives *strength* and *peace* to his people, Israel.

Meaning

Psalm 29 is a hymn that extols God by calling on the *heavenly beings* (angels) to praise him as the power of the storm and the One who dominates the waters that represent chaos. He is the King enthroned over the unruly waters (*the flood*). He is the source of strength and peace for his people.

This psalm speaks in the language of ancient mythology, which is strange to modern audiences. In other words, it uses language that was current in its day and, specifically, language that was typically used to promote the worship of false, non-existent gods in order to encourage the worship of the true God. That said, even a modern audience recognizes the power of a thunderstorm and can understand that power as hinting at God's strength and glory. While we do not typically use the language of the (many) *waters* or *flood* to speak about chaos that threatens to overwhelm us, we can understand that God is to be celebrated as the One who can keep us from being overwhelmed.

In the New Testament, Jesus is pictured as the anointed King (Messiah; Christ) who dominates the waters that represent chaos. He demonstrates his power and his glory by stilling the waters (Mark 4:35–41) and also by walking on the waters (Matt. 14:22–33). The book of Revelation pictures Jesus as defeating the beast that arises out of the sea (Rev. 13:1–10).

Psalm 30. Thanks for healing

Context

Psalm 30 is a classic thanksgiving song, very similar to a hymn, but reminiscent of a previous lament that God has heard. In Brueggemann's terms, it is a song of reorientation after the disorienting experience of calamity, in this case a sickness that approached death. But God has turned the psalmist's *wailing into dancing*, and through this song he enlists fellow worshippers to join him in praise.

The title attributes the song to David, but also connects it to the dedication of the temple, thus raising a problem, since David died before the temple was built, not to mention that the content of Psalm 30 seems out of kilter with the temple's dedication. Even so, it is possible that David prepared this song for original performance at the dedication. After all, he knew his son would build it (2 Sam. 7:13), and David himself exerted considerable energy to collect the materials for him to do so (1 Chr. 22:2–19). Perhaps, though, as some have suggested, the title of Psalm 30 is really the colophon of Psalm 29 (Waltke, 1991).

Comment

30:1–3. Preliminary thanksgiving

The psalmist begins with praise (*I will exalt you*), showing the close connection between hymn and thanksgiving. However, the reasons for his praise quickly follow, indicating that he was motivated by being spared from the grave. He must have been seriously ill, with 'one foot in the grave', as we say, but God *lifted him out of the depths* as a bucket is lifted out of a well. This rescue, he proclaims, was in response to his prayerful request, a remembrance of an earlier lament that he will specify in verses 6–10.

Not only did he fear his demise, but he also shuddered to think of the rejoicing of his *enemies*. The enemies are not named here, because, as we have repeatedly emphasized, these psalms were not written to commemorate the occasion that inspired their writing, but rather to provide a model prayer for later worshippers who could supply their own names for their enemies. The point, though, was that God's rescue curtailed the joy of the healed person's enemies.

30:4–5. Join in the praise

The psalmist's rescue motivates him to enlist the *faithful people* to join in the praise. His purpose is witness. He wants the community to share his joy and to lend their voices to his to extol God. The phrase *faithful people* is a translation of the word *ḥāsīdīm*, which comes from the same root as *ḥesed*, meaning 'love', but of a particular type that exudes loyalty and is connected to the covenant. They are his fellow worshippers, and his story of deliverance is intended to incite them to praise God.

The psalmist had experienced God's anger, which led him to weeping. But, in retrospect, this burden was short-lived, while the favour that leads to rejoicing endures. In the next section, he fills out the details of his testimony.

30:6–10. Redemptive abandonment

The psalmist had begun well before the trauma that unsettled his life. He remembers when he *felt secure*, that is, a time when his life was good. Because of God's favour, he prospered. He further acknowledges that his good life was the result of God's beneficence, when he says, *you [God] made my royal mountain stand firm*. The mountain was a symbol of grandeur, establishment and preeminence. The NIV unhelpfully adds *royal* here, and in a footnote mistakenly identifies it as referring to Zion. The psalmist rather is alluding to what he considers to be his own stability in the light of God's blessing.

However, although his present testimony affirms God's blessing, he remembers the fateful time when he presumptuously claimed, *I shall never be shaken*. God did not let such a brazen claim to independence go unchecked. He redemptively abandoned the psalmist. The abandonment is signalled by the fact that God hid his *face*. He turned his presence away from the psalmist. But this move was redemptive, in that the feeling of divine absence caused the wandering psalmist to run back into the arms of God. It began with a feeling of dismay. And then he repeats the lament prayer that he uttered to God in his desperation (vv. 8–10). From a New Testament perspective, his argument is difficult to appreciate. He asks how he can worship God if he dies. This statement reminds us that during much of the Old Testament period God's people were not aware of the afterlife.

30:11–12. God's answer

God answered the psalmist's prayer with healing, and the psalmist properly responds to God's action with praise. He again (see v. 5) recounts the reversal of *wailing into dancing*. He now sings his thanks to his saving God.

Meaning

The psalm warns its readers not to grow presumptuous about God's blessing. While it is not true that all suffering is the result of sin or that the righteous always prosper (the message of Job and elsewhere), sin does sometimes lead to pain, even illness. This psalm is a model prayer for those who have been healed of a serious illness.

But further, we have even more reason to thank God in the light of sickness. The cross has revealed to us an even deeper dimension of God's response to our suffering. Thanks to Christ's defeat of death by his resurrection, we have been saved from that ultimate evil. Jesus Christ is the one who 'has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Tim. 1:10). How can we neglect to render our thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ?

Psalm 31. Into your hands I commit my spirit

Context

This psalm is an individual lament of a person (probably a leader) in the midst of warfare (and specifically during a siege of a city; see v. 21), ending with an expression of thanksgiving (vv. 19–24). His reaction to the siege has led to emotional and physical trauma (vv. 9–12) and false accusations (vv. 13–18).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

31:1–5. *Protect me*

The opening stanza finds the psalmist in trouble, although the exact nature of the problem is not specified yet (see *Context*). Accordingly, he asks for protection using a full arsenal of relevant metaphors. He has taken refuge in God and therefore asks God to protect him and ultimately to bring him out of danger. He has moved to God for protection and now he asks God to be his *rock of refuge* (see 18:2) and his *strong fortress*. He urges God to hear his request (v. 2a) for deliverance (v. 1c [*pl̄t̄*], v. 5b [*pdh*]), rescue (v. 2b), salvation (from physical distress, v. 2d) and guidance to avoid the traps set for him (vv. 3b–4a). He realizes that he lacks the necessary resources to save himself, so he puts himself totally into God's hands (*Into your hands I commit my spirit*; see *Meaning*). Note the similar opening to Psalm 71.

31:6–8. *You have preserved me*

By committing himself to God's protection, he demonstrates that he trusts God, in contrast to those (his enemies?) who rather put their confidence in false gods (*worthless idols*). While some argue that 'God hates the sin, but not the sinner', the psalmist believes that God will be pleased with his holy hatred for those who vainly look to idols for help. Although the previous and following stanzas make it clear that the psalmist is still in distress, here he expresses confidence that God is aware of his trouble which is for the first time associated with an *enemy*, the first indication that the original setting of this psalm is in warfare. God has kept him from capture; he is still in a *spacious place*, a metaphor for freedom of movement.

31:9–13. *I am in distress*

The psalmist's suffering affects both body and soul. It saps him of emotional and physical strength (vv. 9–10). *Eyes* are a window to the soul, and his eyes have grown weak because of his trouble (see Pss 6:7; 69:3; 88:9). He blames his enemies for his condition, but it is exacerbated by the reaction of his close associates (*friends* and *neighbours*) who shun him (see also Job 19:14, 19; Jer. 20:10). They treat him as if he were dead, like broken pottery that is good for nothing and is thrown away (see also Ps. 2:9; Isa. 30:14; Jer. 25:34 [Heb.]; Rev. 2:27). They whisper among themselves that terror surrounds them. *Terror on every side* is an expression used also in Jeremiah (Jer. 6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29). 'Such an expression depicts a hopeless state of terror where survival itself is threatened' (*NIDOTTE* 1: 840). The title names David as the composer, and, as we will see, the setting is clearly warfare. Perhaps his close associates are upset that their leader has brought them into a dire situation, and so they plot to kill him.

31:14–18. *I trust you*

Again, the composer puts his trust in God in the face of his adversaries. He understands that his circumstances (*my times*), even if not good, are under God's control (*in your hands*). He continues to urge God to have a positive disposition towards him (*Let your face shine on your servant*; see the priestly benediction in Num. 6:25). God's light brings life and everything associated with life. While he requests that God give him life, he asks that his enemies die. He asks God to keep him from the *shame* that will be inflicted on the enemy.

31:19–20. *You hide your people*

The psalmist has asked for protection, and in these verses he celebrates the safety that God provides for those who fear him (i.e. those who have a proper attitude towards God, Ps. 111:2–5).

31:21–22. *Praise God!*

The psalmist calls on God's people to worship the Lord. Here he mentions that God has shown him his *love* (or loyalty; *hesed*; see also vv. 7, 16), specifically when he felt cut off from God during a time when he was in a *city under siege*. When this siege happened is not clear (there is no reason to take this as a metaphor), but the psalmist bears witness to the fact that God heard him. It seems best to take this as a reference to his present predicament, but it is possible that it refers to an earlier crisis.

31:23–24. *Love the Lord*

The psalmist concludes by calling on the congregation to love God and to be encouraged in the midst of the present struggle. After all, as the psalmist points out, God takes care of his people, but undermines those who resist him (*the proud*).

Meaning

The psalmist turns to God for protection and rescue from present trouble. While there are hints that the original setting was warfare and specifically a siege (v. 21), the psalm may be used by later worshippers who need protection from any kind of danger.

Jesus found encouragement in this psalm as he was dying on the cross. At the climactic moment, he uttered the words of verse 5 (*into your hands I commit my spirit*) to express his absolute confidence in God's ability to rescue him (Luke 23:46). Of course, God did not rescue him from the cross, and he died, but God's rescue came in the form of the resurrection. Peter encourages believers to have the same attitude towards God: 'So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good' (VanGemeren 2008: 304).

Psalm 32. Blessed is the one whose sins are covered

Context

The psalmist happily thanks God for forgiving his sin which had led to intense physical and emotional duress. This forgiveness came as a consequence of his repentance. Traditionally, Psalm 32 has been treated as a penitential psalm (along with Pss 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 133). The tone of the song is not sorrowful, however, because this prayer was uttered in the aftermath of God's forgiveness. The psalm is also notable because of its connection with wisdom literature (as noted in the commentary below).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

32:1–2. Blessed are the forgiven

The psalmist begins with a beatitude on those God has forgiven. While it is wrong to conceal one's sins from God, God covers the sins of those who acknowledge their sin and repent (see v. 5). The NIV misleadingly translates two different Hebrew words as *sin* (v. 1c [ḥāṭā'â] and v. 2b [ʿāwôn]). The NJB captures the nuance of verse 2b with 'How blessed are those to whom Yahweh imputes no guilt.' The blessed person is a sinner, but God does not count it against them. In the following stanzas, he will make clear that his joy arises from his own personal experience of God's forgiveness.

While verses 1–2b declare that blessed are those who are forgiven by God, verse 2c adds, *Blessed is the one...in whose spirit is no deceit*. In terms of what follows in the psalm, it is likely that the psalmist is speaking of the need for the person sincerely to own up and repent of their sin.

32:3–4. Your heavy hand

The psalmist's personal experience illustrates the principle enunciated in the first two verses. He remembers the time before he confessed his sins (*when I kept silent*), and the result was physical (*my bones wasted away*)⁵¹ and emotional (*groaning*) suffering. Indeed, anyone who lives in a hot climate (like Israel in the summer) can relate to the psalmist's simile describing his lack of energy as of someone whose strength is sapped by the summer sun. Now the book of Job is a

strong reminder that not all suffering is the result of sin, nor does sin necessarily lead immediately to suffering. However, that does not mean that sin never leads to suffering, and in the case of the psalmist it apparently did. He is aware that his suffering had a divine origin (*your hand was heavy on me*).

32:5. *I confess and you forgive*

Repentance leads to forgiveness. The psalmist testifies that when he confessed his sins, God forgave him. He did not *cover up* his sin, but once he had acknowledged it, God covered it up (v. 1c). The sages taught that ‘those who simply conceal their wickedness will not succeed, but those who confess and abandon it will receive compassion’ (Prov. 28:13).^[52]

32:6–7. The psalmist calls on the *faithful* (or loyal [to the covenant]; *ḥāsīdīm*) to turn to God in prayer, presumably specifically to repent of their sins and find God’s forgiveness. If they do so, then the *mighty waters*, a symbol of chaos originating in Ancient Near Eastern mythology (see also Pss 29:3; 107:23; 144:7), will not overcome them. The psalmist finds a *hiding-place* from the difficulties of the world in God (Pss 27:5; 31:21; 91:1; in contrast to the wicked who find their hiding-place in a lie, Isa. 28:17). Rather than encountering trouble, he will be surrounded by *songs of deliverance* (like the present one), sung by all those whom God has forgiven.

32:8–11. *I will teach you*

The psalmist, assuming the role of a sage, assures the congregation that he will teach them the right way (the same sentiment is expressed in 51:13). The language of instruction and the *way* (*derek*; a metaphor for life’s journey) fits squarely in the wisdom tradition (Longman 2006: 56–61). He will give them advice based on his knowledge of them (he has *his eye* [*loving* is not in the Hebrew] on them). He warns them not to be undisciplined like a *horse* or a *mule* that will obey only if compelled by *bit and bridle*. As Proverbs 26:3 puts it, ‘A whip for the horse, a bridle for a donkey, and a rod for the backs of fools’.^[53] Such are fools; but the righteous wise freely and willingly submit themselves to God.

The final two verses speak to the condition of the *wicked* and the *righteous* (a division also well known in wisdom). The wicked will experience woe, while the righteous will experience God’s *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *ḥesed*). Thus, the latter should sing praises to God.

Meaning

Psalm 32 is good news for sinners, proclaiming that forgiveness is available. However, forgiveness does not come automatically, but only after confession and repentance. Such is the wise way to live (see the above quote from Prov. 28:13).

The New Testament teaches that a relationship with Christ begins with repentance. John the Baptist's message to those who came out to him was: 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!' (Mark 1:15). Repentance involves acknowledgment and repudiation of sin, as well as a turning towards God. James encourages his readers to 'come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up' (4:8–10). The psalmist is a model of one who humbled himself before God with the result that God lifted him up out of his troubles.

This repentance is not a work that merits God's forgiveness. As Paul points out, quoting the opening verses of our psalm, God's forgiveness is offered purely as an act of his grace (Rom. 4:4–8).

Psalm 33. No king is saved by the size of his army

Context

This hymn calls on the congregation to sing a victory hymn (*a new song*) to the Lord. He is the God who brings order out of disorder, controls the chaos in the act of creation and also defeats Israel's historical enemies. The majority of the psalm speaks to the congregation about God, but the final verse turns to God to ask him to continue his loving relationship with his people.

Comment

33:1–3. A new song

The psalm begins with a call for the congregation (*the righteous/the upright*) to worship God with music and enthusiasm. Praising God is what we were created to do (*it is fitting*); as a result, we experience joy when we praise him. The psalmist calls on Israel to sing a *new song* to the Lord. 'New song' occurs elsewhere in the Psalms (40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1), as well as in Isaiah (42:10) and the book of Revelation (5:9; 14:3) in contexts connected to warfare. A new song is a hymn of victory, sung after God has made all things new by his defeat of the forces of evil. The military setting of the present psalm will become obvious in the stanzas that follow (Longman, 1984).

33:4–5. The word of God

God's word is right and true, and his actions in the world demonstrate his (covenantal) faithfulness. As a result, the world testifies to his *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *hesed*). Since God loves *righteousness and justice*, his words and actions will be both righteous and just.

33:6–9. God made the heavens by his word

Just as in Genesis 1, the psalmist (vv. 6, 9) tells of creation by God's spoken and powerful word. The Lord speaks, and as a result the heavens are created; the Lord breathes his word, and the stars are born. And in verse 9, the Lord speaks and the world begins to appear at his command. These are echoes of creation found in Genesis 1. Psalm 33 intimates the idea of creation from nothing, in which a totally free God creates the world apart from any forces external to his

loving desire to bring such a world into existence (Peters 1993: 11), a concept also encountered in Genesis 1. In Psalm 33:6, the Lord merely spoke and the heavens were created. And in verse 9, when he spoke, the world began! It appeared at his command. Verse 7 describes how God at creation gathered the sea and stored away the deeps. The NIV depicts God gathering the water into *jars*, although the marginal note, as well as other translations (see REB), translates the relevant word as ‘heap’. In either case, the verse understands that God rules over the waters that often symbolize chaos and need to be controlled for the world to function (see also Prov. 8:29). God’s creative act should lead everyone to demonstrate their subservience and dependence upon him by fearing him.

33:10–11. *God’s plans prevail*

These verses contrast the *plans of the LORD* with the *plans of the nations*. The latter are quickly undermined, while the former last forever. After all, God is eternal, and the nations are temporal institutions. Elsewhere in the Psalms (see Ps. 2), the plans of the nations are seen as inimical to the plans of God and are thus quickly shut down.

33:12–15. *God sees all*

However, there is one exception among the nations: the nation God *chose for his inheritance*, which of course is Israel (Exod. 19:3–6; Deut. 7:7–11). No other nation, ancient or modern, fits this category. Today, God’s people are not a nation state, but rather the church. And we must keep in mind that God’s choice of Israel was not just to bless them, but to bring a blessing to all the nations through Israel (Gen. 12:1–3). Indeed, verses 13–15 move quickly from the beatitude on Israel to recognition that God watches over all his people. He is concerned about their inner life (*the hearts of all*) and their actions (*everything they do*).

33:16–19. *God saves*

The military setting of this hymn (designated ‘a new song’ in v. 3) becomes clear in this stanza, as it articulates the essence of the Old Testament’s theology of warfare. Military success is not found in strength of numbers or in superior armaments, but rather in faith in God the Warrior who is able to deliver them from death through battle, famine or any other disaster (Deut. 7:17–26; 20; Longman and Reid, 1995).

33:20–22. *Waiting for the Lord*

God's people can live in confidence even in the midst of attack, because he can provide protection (as their *help* and *shield*, the latter clearly a military metaphor of protection). Such trust leads to praise. The final verse is the first to address God directly, as the psalmist requests that God's *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) be with them.

Meaning

The psalm celebrates God as the Creator who brings order to disorder (*the waters*) and is the decisive force in the battle against his people's enemies. Thus, the psalm is a strong statement about God's sovereignty over unruly forces. New Testament readers of this psalm live in the midst of conflict, but it is better characterized as spiritual warfare. Even so, like the psalmist (and David facing Goliath; see 1 Sam. 17:45–47), Christians understand that their protection comes from God himself (Eph. 6:10–20).

Verse 6 celebrates creation by proclaiming, *By the word of the LORD the heavens were made*. John 1:1–3 speaks of Jesus as the Word: 'Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made.'⁵⁴

Psalm 34. Taste and see that the Lord is good

Context

While wisdom traits permeate the psalm, the prayer is one of thanksgiving. The psalmist, who identifies himself as a *poor man*, was rescued by God and now praises God and encourages his fellow worshippers to join him. The psalm is written in an acrostic form (see Introduction, p. 46).^[55]

The historical title places the composition of this psalm in the context of David's brief time in the Philistine city of Gath, although rather than Ahimelek, the king is called Achish (perhaps another name for the same king) in 1 Samuel 21:10–15. David had sought political refuge from Saul with the king of Gath, but found himself in a dangerous situation because the king's officials were worried about David's military prowess and were probably concerned that he might be planning harm against the kingdom of Gath. David got out of the situation by pretending to be insane and thus being sent away. The connection between the psalm and the historical situation is that the psalmist (like David in 1 Sam. 21) found himself in trouble. The psalmist called on God, and God answered his prayer and rescued him. If there is a connection, then calling on God does not preclude being proactive in working towards one's rescue. Another connection is that David was afraid of the king (1 Sam. 21:12), but the psalm teaches that the fear of God drives out fear of other, even powerful, people.

Comment

34:1–3. *Glorify the Lord*

The worship leader both proclaims his praise for God and asks the congregation to join him in worship. In particular, he asks those who are *afflicted* to glorify God. As we will see, the psalmist recognizes that those who suffer especially benefit from God's care.

34:4–7. *God heard my prayer*

The psalmist then gives his personal testimony of rescue from trouble. He refers to himself in the third person as *this poor man*. Poor here may be understood as humble, as opposed to proud. He called to God, and God answered his prayers. At this point, we become aware that the psalm is a thanksgiving prayer. He was

fearful, but is no more. Interestingly, he identifies *those who fear God* as those who are delivered from their other fears. The fear of God drives out fear of anything else. The *angel of the LORD* sometimes stands for the Lord himself and at other times for his spiritual agent. In any case, the psalmist understands that God is the ultimate source of his rescue. The fact that the angel encamps around those who fear him points to God as the Divine Warrior who fights on behalf of his people (Josh. 5:14).

34:8–14. *Taste and see*

The psalmist uses a culinary metaphor to urge his listeners into a relationship with God (*Taste and see that the LORD is good*). Like a cook who urges a reluctant eater just to give it a taste, so the psalmist encourages them to sample God and his protection, confident that they will thus recognize his benefits.

He encourages them to *fear God*. In the previous stanza, he testified that he feared God and was thus rescued from his other fears. While the wicked (*the lions*; see Job 4:7–11) languish, those who fear God will *lack nothing/no good thing*. This is not a naïve belief that God's people will prosper, but rather that those who fear God recognize fundamentally that their relationship with God will satisfy them completely.

Life is found in a proper relationship with God, one characterized by the fear of God and ethical behaviour. God's people speak the truth and seek peace.

34:15–16. *God is for the righteous*

The psalmist is under no illusions. God cares for the righteous, but he will punish the wicked. While he will answer the prayers of the former, he will eradicate all memory (*their name*) of the wicked. By this observation, the psalmist thus urges his hearers towards a righteous life.

34:17–20. *God hears the prayers of the righteous*

God helps those who are psychologically and emotionally vulnerable (*the broken-hearted/those who are crushed in spirit*). He answers their prayers for help. The psalmist realizes that the righteous may have problems, but he believes that God will preserve them from all of them. The fact that no bone will be broken is probably not an allusion to the Passover lamb, but simply to the fact that God's people will remain unscathed (Eriksson 1991: 14).

34:21–22. *Consequences for the wicked and God's servants*

The psalm ends by stating the different consequences that await the wicked and

the righteous. The former come to a bad end. Indeed, their own evil will result in their demise. On the other hand, the righteous, who may be suffering at present, will be rescued.

Meaning

The psalmist was a person who found his fears calmed in the *fear of the LORD* and he urges his fellow worshippers to do the same. Indeed, the fear of the Lord drives out the fear of anything or anyone else. The title to the psalm presents David in the Philistine court as a prime example. To read the psalm in the light of its title leads one to identify *this poor man* (v. 6) with David. However, the psalmist did not write the psalm as a memorial to a past event, but with the hope that later readers (including us) would identify with the speaker.

The psalm plays a significant role in Peter's first epistle. First, verse 8 (*Taste and see that the LORD is good*) lies behind 1 Peter 2:3. It concludes Peter's call that his readers 'be holy' (1:15). Like the psalmist, he calls on them to 'live...in reverent fear' (1:17). Interestingly, Peter does not call on his hearers to 'taste that the Lord is good', but acknowledges that they 'have tasted that the Lord is good'. In other words, his hearers have heeded the call of the psalmist. It is also significant that to Peter the Lord is none other than Jesus.

Peter quotes verses 12–16 in 1 Peter 3:10–13. According to Ericksson, the psalm is cited in order 'to motivate, to recapitulate, and to conclude the whole paraenetic section directed to the different groups of the household. The description of the righteous in the psalm is seen as a fitting description of how the Christian should live' (Eriksson 1991: 115).

Finally, it is likely that verse 20 (*he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken*) is the text, or at least one of the texts, in the mind of John when he speaks of the fact that Jesus died on the cross before it was necessary to break the bones in his legs. In this, Jesus is like the righteous sufferer of our psalm, although there is probably also a connection with the paschal lamb (see Exod. 12:46; Num. 9:12).

Psalm 35. Contend with them

Context

The language of Psalm 35 indicates that the poem is a lament of an individual who has been falsely accused of a capital crime in the court. He calls on God to rescue him, since eyewitnesses, whose testimony is critical, lie about his involvement in the crime. He asks God to punish his detractors with the punishment they intend for him and he promises God that he will worship him as a result of his intervention.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

35:1–3. Contend, Lord

The legal context of this psalm comes to the fore with the psalmist's request that God contend with those who contend with him. The verb *contend* (*rîb*) is a legal term that can also be rendered 'make a case against' or 'accuse'. The legal setting of this psalm will become increasingly obvious as we read on, but the second colon of verse 1 uses military language, and indeed military language is appropriate for court cases (ancient and modern). They are like battles, and the psalmist calls on God to take up armaments (vv. 2–3a) to defeat his opponents and to present him with a victory. The call for God to *arise* is also familiar from psalms that were sung before a battle (see commentary at Ps. 7:6). He looks to God to reassure him with an oracle proclaiming, *I am your salvation*.

35:4–6. Shame them

His accusers are trying to put an end to his life. He asks that God thwart their intentions and bring the punishment they seek for him on them. He hopes they are humiliated. He wants them to be like *chaff*, rootless and driven in every direction by the wind (Ps. 1:4–5). Here the angel of the Lord drives them away. The angel of God is either one of his ministering angels or perhaps even the Lord himself. The idea that the wicked themselves receive the punishment that they intended for another is a well-known wisdom motif, as is the idea of the *path*, which stands for one's life journey. There are two possible paths: one that is straight and leads to God and life, and one that is *dark and slippery* and leads

to death.

35:7–10. *Ruin them*

In an imprecatory statement, the psalmist asks God to bring the horrors that his enemies wanted for him on them, using the language of the fowler who sets out nets to trap birds (a well-known image in the book of Proverbs; see Prov. 29:5, as well as Ps. 10:9 and Hos. 5:1). The idea of punishment redounding on the wicked is also seen in the metaphor of the *pit*. They dug it and fell into it (Ps. 9:15–18; Prov. 26:27). The pit is often used in reference to the grave (Job 33:18, 22, 24, 28, 30).

Once God has punished the wicked with the punishment they intended for the psalmist, he will rejoice with all his heart and proclaim the uniqueness of God (*Who is like you, LORD?*; Exod. 15:11). His rescue will illustrate the principle enunciated in verse 10c–d that God helps the weak against the powerful.

35:11–16. *False witnesses*

The psalmist complains that his enemies are *ruthless witnesses*, who question the psalmist about matters of which he is ignorant, the implication being that they are falsely accusing him. They are ruthless because they do not care about the truth; they just want to hurt him.

He contrasts himself with his opponents. He showed them nothing but compassion and did his best to help them when they were in need. He fasted and put on *sackcloth* to ask God to heal them when they were sick. If they did die, he mourned for them as if they were his most intimate and beloved relative (his *mother*). For their part, they took joy in his failures. They mocked him and expressed their anger towards him. He was good to them, whereas they were malicious to him (v. 12a; Pss 38:20; 109:5).

35:17–21. *How long?*

The psalmist begs God to rescue him from these accusers who make false claims about him. They lie by claiming to be eyewitnesses to some unspecified crime that the psalmist supposedly committed (v. 21). The call *how long* indicates surprise on the part of the psalmist that God has let this charade go on as long as it has. They ravage him like *lions* ravage their prey, and only God can help him. If God does not come to his aid, then his enemies will succeed and will *gloat* over their victory.

35:22–25. *Contend!*

In an ancient Israelite courtroom, the testimony of witnesses was critical, which is why those who bear false witness break God's law at the most fundamental level (Exod. 20:16; Deut. 5:20), particularly when the case concerns a capital crime (Deut. 19:15–21). Indeed, since the psalmist worries about his life, it is likely that the accusation assumed here is one that demands the death penalty. The composer thus calls on God to rise up and come to his defence in order to counter the testimony of his enemies.

35:26–27. Shame them

He then asks God to bring grief to those who are happy about his distress and joy to those who delight in his rescue from his predicament. After all, his rescue is a demonstration of the fact that God takes care of those who serve him.

35:28. I will praise God

He concludes with a clear declaration that he will worship God.

Meaning

Psalm 35 is the prayer of a person who has been falsely accused of a crime that could lead to his death. He calls on God to rescue him, since he is otherwise defenceless in the face of eyewitness testimony. Although the setting is clearly the courtroom, the psalm can encourage any who are falsely accused, whether in or outside of a courtroom.

As we read the psalm in the light of Jesus' life, we certainly see him as someone who was falsely accused and convicted. According to John 15:25, the Gospel writers said that Jesus suffered the false accusations of his contemporaries, quoting verse 19 of our psalm ('they hated me without reason'; see also Ps. 69:4). Of course, this culminated in the trial that led to his death on the cross (see Matt. 26:57–68). God did not rescue Jesus from the cross, but he rescued him through the power of the resurrection.

Psalm 36. See how the evildoers lie fallen!

Context

This psalm demonstrates awareness of a threat. The psalmist clearly recognizes the danger that evil people pose to him and God's people. They do not fear God, so they devise evil plots constantly. Many readers would identify this psalm as a lament, and indeed the composer asks God to continue to protect the faithful from attack. However, the psalmist also affirms God's covenantal commitment to take care of his people. Indeed, the psalm ends with a confident declaration of the demise of wicked people (v. 12). For these reasons, I depart from the consensus and treat this poem as a psalm of confidence. The psalm also displays terminology and concepts that are associated with the wisdom tradition.

Proverbs teaches that the *fear of God* is the beginning of wisdom, something rejected by evil fools (most famously Prov. 1:7). Fools do not fear God, but are wise in their own eyes.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

36:1–4. *The wicked*

The psalmist has insight concerning evil people and recognizes that his insight comes from God (*I have a message from God in my heart*).^[56] Evil people sin because they do not *fear God*. The expression 'fear God' is best known in wisdom literature (most notably Job 28:28; Prov. 1:7; Eccl. 12:13). Those who fear God are wise, godly and righteous, while those who don't are foolish, ungodly and wicked (Longman 2006: 57–58). Since they do not fear God, they misperceive themselves as the centre of the universe and thus they flatter themselves and do not recognize their sin. Like the fool in Proverbs, they do not listen to correction or pay attention to their mistakes and thus are doomed to repeat them (Longman 2006: 77–78). Sin pervades their lives, so even at night (*on their beds*) as they fall asleep, they are planning evil (see Mic. 2:1).

36:5–9. *God's gracious character*

The psalmist now addresses God directly to extol his character and the benefits of a relationship with him. The psalmist uses words associated with God's

covenant with Israel. God's people enjoy his *love* (v. 5, or loyalty [*hesed*; the same word is translated *unfailing love* in v. 7]), his *righteousness*, *faithfulness* and *justice*. God displays these qualities in abundance. His love and faithfulness reach upwards to the heavens. His righteousness is as high as the highest mountains (cf. ESV: 'your righteousness is like the mountains of God'^[57]) and his justice as deep as the deepest sea.

The benefits of a relationship with God include protection. The psalmist expresses his intention to trust God by evoking the refuge provided by a bird's *wings* (see also Pss 17:8; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). To most, this suggests the image of a bird shielding its young with its *wings*,^[58] or perhaps driving away potential threats from its young with the rapid beating of its wings. However, there is also the possibility that there is a polemical function to this image and that the comparison is with winged deities of the Ancient Near East. Perhaps both are brought to mind, since the winged deities themselves are bird-like.^[59] God provides the sustenance needed for life, both food and drink (v. 8). The reference to God's *house* in verse 8 is likely a reference to the sanctuary, thus perhaps linking the feast's abundance to the fellowship offerings enjoyed by worshippers (Lev. 3; Broyles 2005: 153), though this may be rendered doubtful because of the parallel with drink. We know of no drink offering that was shared by the worshipper. God is a *fountain of life*, a metaphor well known from Proverbs (see 10:11; 13:14; 14:27; 16:22). As a fountain spews forth refreshing water, so God is the source of life. He provides light, light that illuminates our life.

36:10–12. Continue your love towards us

The psalmist concludes with the request that God continue to display his *love* and *righteousness* to his faithful people. He specifically asks to be protected from the wicked. He ends with a triumphant proclamation that evil people have been, and will be, subdued.

Meaning

The psalm reflects confidence in God in the face of hostile threats. Those, ancient and modern, who pray this psalm call on God, trusting that he will answer their plea for help. The psalm magnificently describes God's character as loving, faithful, righteous and just. It also names him as the source of all life. Jesus, the Son of God, displays God's wonderful character as expressed in this psalm.

Psalm 37. Do not fret

Context

Psalm 37 shares many similarities in tone with Psalm 36. The psalmist here is fully aware of the dangers that evil people pose, but he speaks in such a way as to assure his hearers that the wicked will not prevail over the righteous. The particular issue seems to be possession of the land, which sustains life. The psalm implies that the wicked are in control, but also assures the godly that their success is temporary and they are the ones who will possess the land.

Language and concepts associated with the wisdom tradition ring loud in Psalm 37, leading many to categorize the poem as a wisdom psalm, although, in my opinion, since the intention of the speaker is to instil confidence in the hearts of his hearers, we might also think of it as a song of confidence. Psalm 37 is an acrostic poem (see Introduction, p. 46), and the NIV creates stanzas according to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The following analysis will treat some of these stanzas together on topical grounds.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

37:1–11. Do not fret

The psalmist begins with a series of exhortations that urge hearers to place their confidence in God and thus not worry about evil people who threaten trouble. Verses 1–2 point out that evil people present a temporary threat. They may appear imposing, but, *like vegetation (grass/green plants)* under a hot sun, they will wither away. As the book of Proverbs points out (Prov. 11:18; 13:11; 22:6; 22:16), the prosperity of the wicked is short-lived; thus the godly have no reason to be jealous.

Verses 3–4 urge trust in God, and right behaviour (see Prov. 3:5–6). Rather than worrying about evil people, the godly should rest comfortably in the land. God will give them safety. One who delights in the Lord will have desires that conform to God's will for their lives. God will grant what they request.

The next mini-stanza (vv. 5–6) also encourages trust in God to the point of committing one's life (*way*) to him (see also Prov. 16:3). God will reward and vindicate those who put their confidence in him.

Verse 7 exhorts the hearers not to worry, but to wait patiently, even in the light of the apparent success of the wicked. Again, the thought is that their success is ephemeral and will ultimately dissipate.

Verses 8–9 also (*do not fret* is repeated for the third time) warn against worry and in addition caution against the kind of anger that grows from a sense of injustice in the light of the prosperity of the wicked. If someone worries, it might lead them to an act of disobedience or betrayal of God. Once more, the psalmist reminds his hearers that, although it looks as if evil people are doing well, they will ultimately be destroyed. And, further, although the godly are suffering, they are the ones who will prosper in the land.

Verses 10–11 bring the first section of the psalm to a close, again contrasting the final fate of the wicked (destruction) with that of the righteous (here described as *meek*), who will prosper in the land.

37:12–15. *The wicked*

Verses 12 and 14 speak of the plots of the wicked against the righteous. The former are angry and want to devour the godly (implied by the idiom of gnashing their teeth). The wicked take up arms, which could be understood either literally or figuratively, or both, to destroy them. But although they think they are formidable, God merely laughs at their futile attempts (see Ps. 2:4). Rather than killing the righteous, the wicked end up killing themselves (v. 15). Their coming day is one of judgment.

37:16–17. *Better righteousness than wealth*

The psalmist joins the sages of Proverbs by speaking (through the use of a better-than proverb) of the relative benefit of righteousness over wealth (Prov. 15:16; 16:8; 28:6). In the long run, the righteous will succeed, while the wicked will fail.

37:18–22. *The righteous and the wicked*

Although appearances may be deceptive, the *blameless*, another name for wise and godly people, will not suffer, even in a disaster like a *famine*. The *inheritance* in mind here is the land of Israel that God gave to his people. In contrast, the wicked, who may prosper at present (*like the flowers of the field*), will *go up in smoke*. God will make sure this happens, since he takes care of the blameless and is an enemy to the wicked.

Reflecting the teaching of Proverbs, the psalmist points out that the righteous are generous and the wicked are self-serving and stingy. According to the sages,

‘The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern’ (29:7), and ‘Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses’ (28:27). Indeed, the psalmist points out that the wicked do worse than not be generous; they take money and don’t repay their debts. Again, the psalmist points out that God will give land to the righteous and remove the wicked from it.

37:23–24. *Security for the righteous*

Wisdom literature speaks of one’s life course as a journey on a path. The wise walk steadily on that path thanks to God’s help. Indeed, life brings its pitfalls, and the wise stumble, but are never down and out.

37:25–26. *God blesses the righteous*

According to Proverbs 10:3, ‘The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked’, and the psalmist here agrees with this observation. As a general principle, the testimony of the sages is true, but there are exceptions (see the book of Job), and they are not making universal claims, in spite of the psalmist’s personal experience.⁶⁰

37:27–29. *Turn from evil*

The psalmist exhorts his hearers to do good, not evil, and motivates right behaviour by pointing out the consequent reward (the *land*) and punishment for those who continue in their evil (destruction).

37:30–33. *The righteous and the wicked*

Again, the psalmist contrasts the righteous and the wicked. The speech of the righteous is wise and just, reflecting the fact that they have integrated the *law* of God in their hearts. As a result, they will not slip on the journey of life. On the other hand, the wicked attack the righteous (see the warning of the father to the son in Prov. 1:8–19). Verse 33 suggests that the wicked are in positions of power and are able to bring the wise to trial. The psalmist nonetheless assures them that they will not be condemned by the court.

37:34. *Hope*

The righteous are exhorted to hope in God, in spite of their dire circumstances. Again, the reward of the land should motivate them, as well as the destruction of the wicked.

37:35–38. *Like a luxuriant tree*

Earlier, the psalmist appealed to his experience to state that he had never seen the righteous forsaken. Now he testifies that, although indeed he has seen the wicked succeed (*like a luxuriant native tree*), their prosperity was only temporary. The blameless will live on into the future, while the wicked will be destroyed.

37:39–40. *God saves*

The psalm ends by reassuring the beleaguered community of the godly that God will indeed protect them from the assaults of the wicked, since they seek protection (*stronghold, refuge*) in God.

Meaning

While appearances suggest that the wicked are on top, the godly should wait patiently, since the success of the wicked will not last and reward will eventually come to those who put their trust in God. The *land* plays a pivotal role in this psalm. The background seems to be that the wicked now control the land, and the righteous are oppressed. On an individual level, the conflict between the wicked and the righteous regarding possession of the land is illustrated by the story of Ahab and Naboth (1 Kgs 21). Although Ahab under Jezebel's influence was able to kill and dispossess Naboth, it was not long before Ahab's day of judgment came (1 Kgs 21:13; 22:29–40).

God had given his people land during the Old Testament period. Verse 11 proclaims that *the meek will inherit the land*. Readers of the New Testament will quickly remember that Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount announced that 'the meek will inherit the earth' (Matt. 5:5). The New Testament does not offer physical land to those who follow God, but something much better. In this life, it appears that the wicked are often on top, but the book of Revelation, among many other places, reminds us that God will ultimately destroy the wicked and bring his people into the new Jerusalem. Indeed, we should *hope in the LORD and keep his way* (v. 34), because *the salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD* (v. 39).

Psalm 38. Lord, do not forsake me

Context

The psalm is recognizable right from the start as a lament of an individual. The psalmist is in physical, emotional and psychological pain and turns to God for help. He knows that his suffering is a result of his sin and so he turns to the only One who can help him, namely God. He also urgently asks God for help against his enemies who seek to take advantage of his weakened condition.

Traditionally, Psalm 38 has been treated as a penitential psalm (along with Pss 6, 32, 51, 102, 130, 133).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

38:1–8. *I am in pain*

The psalmist immediately and urgently asks God to hold back his anger towards him. In an opening very similar to 6:1, he asks God to refrain from both verbal reprimand (*do not rebuke me*, v. 1a) as well as physical punishment (*or discipline me*, v. 1b). He has no illusions about the source of his present suffering; God himself is punishing him (*your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down on me*, v. 2). Unlike Job, he knows full well that he deserves what he is getting. While the Bible makes it very clear that not all suffering is caused by sin, nor that all sin leads immediately or inexorably to suffering (at least in this life), the Bible does teach that sin can lead to affliction. He describes his agony, and it is both physical (*there is no health in my body*, v. 3a) and psychological (*my guilt has overwhelmed me*). Pain and guilt can cause a person to flee from God, but the psalmist instead rightly turns to him for help.

38:9–12. *Others avoid me*

Verses 9–10 continue the description of the psalmist's suffering, here with an emphasis on his emotions. He exposes his struggles to God through his *sighing*. The situation has completely sapped him of strength. In these and the previous verses, the psalmist has given a vivid account of the effects of the anxiety caused by guilt.

That internal effect is compounded by the reaction of other people. Those close to him (*friends, companions, neighbours*) now keep their distance. The reasons are not clear, but perhaps they are repelled by his sinful acts. On the other hand, there are people who do want to get close to him, but in order to kill him.

38:13–16. *I am needy*

His guilt has stunned and incapacitated him (vv. 13–14). But he has not given up hope, which is squarely placed in God. He has asked God not to let his enemies triumph over him. Although he cannot speak, God will speak on his behalf.

38:17–20. *Confession*

His pain is about to overwhelm him completely. He staggers, but has not yet fallen, though he is on the brink. His pain, emotional and physical, is chronic (v. 17). He has sinned, but he has also confessed and owned up to his sin (v. 18). He complains further about his enemies in verses 19–20. The NIV 2011 translation infers that these enemies have no reason to harass him (*enemies without cause*), a change from the earlier edition which rendered the phrase ‘vigorous enemies’.^[61] Verse 20 may suggest a court setting for this lament, since his enemies are trying to get at him through *accusations*.

38:21–22. *Do not forsake me*

The psalmist ends with a final appeal to God to help him in the midst of his struggles.

Meaning

Psalm 38 provides a powerful portrait of the pain of guilt. The difference between the godly and the wicked isn’t that the latter sin while the former do not, but rather that the godly feel remorse that leads them to repentance and a desire to move closer to God. On the other hand, the wicked are calloused and do not feel as if they have done anything wrong. Even before the psalmist feels completely forgiven, he still calls on God to help him against his enemies who want to take advantage of him.

Christians are not people who have stopped sinning. Rather, we have become even more aware of our sin (Rom. 7:7–25) and suffer from feelings of guilt. But guilt is not an end in itself; it drives us to repent and to throw ourselves on God’s grace. Jesus, after all, died on the cross in order to free us from the pain of sin,

guilt and death (Heb. 10:1–18). Psalm 38 provides a model prayer for those who feel deep sorrow over their sin, not just to express their pain, but also to repent and turn to God. In this prayer, we should hear the call of the author of Hebrews when he says, ‘Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water’ (Heb. 10:22).

Psalm 39. Look away from me

Context

While some laments display an angry or bitter tone, this one is reflective and pleading. The psalmist tried to restrain himself, but eventually had to speak in order to ask God to rescue him from the troubles that he recognized resulted from his own sins. This individual lament shares terminology and interests with the wisdom tradition, as indicated right from the start with his concern to *watch my ways* (Prov. 16:17) and guard his tongue. Interestingly, it is a rare lament in that it does not end with a clear resolution (see Introduction on Laments, pp. 39–40).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

39:1–3. *I had to speak*

The psalmist reports his internal struggle as he tries to control his speech. He does not tell us specifically why he would sin if he spoke, only that he would, particularly if he spoke in the presence of the *wicked*. It is likely that the wicked were bringing false charges against him (see comparison with Jesus in *Meaning*). Thus, he suppressed all speech, including positive things, apparently worried that if he started speaking, he would not be able to restrain himself from expressing what was on his heart in a way that would lead to sin. The matter will become clearer in the following stanzas, but for now he simply reports how difficult it was not to speak. Rather than helping, his silence only increased his anxiety, which he expresses metaphorically as his heart growing hot within him (cf. similar sentiment expressed in Jeremiah's lament, Jer. 20:9). The word translated *meditated* (*hagîg*) is rare, occurring only here and in Psalm 5:1, but the NIV believes there is a different nuance of meaning, since in Psalm 5 it translates the word as 'lament'. We should probably understand that the psalmist's meditation here is tinged with lament. Finally, he can stand it no longer and so he speaks. His following words do come across more as a meditation than a lament.

39:4–6. *The fragility of life*

Rather than making a complaint, the psalmist asks God to make him realize just how short and insubstantial his life is. He is not alone; everyone is fragile, even those who from the outside look as though their lives are together (*secure*). His life is short like the small measure of the width of a hand (v. 5a). His life is insubstantial like a *breath* (v. 5c; see also v. 11). The word ‘breath’ (*hebel*) is well known from Ecclesiastes, where it is used over forty times and in that context is rightly translated ‘meaningless’.⁶² The word essentially means ‘breath, vapour, bubble’, and here it does signify transience. Interestingly, like the Teacher in Ecclesiastes (Eccl. 2:17–23), the psalmist comments on the meaninglessness of amassing wealth that will only end up going to someone else, without knowing who that will be.

39:7–11. *Remove your scourge*

In these verses, we finally learn why the psalmist felt awkward about sharing his concerns in front of the wicked. After all, his meditation on the brevity of life is a healthy one. Now we see that his reflection on life’s brevity is motivated by the threat to his life, which he understands to come from God in response to his sin. He did not want to speak because God was punishing him. Thus, he responds properly by acknowledging his sin and asking God to stop punishing him. He places his hope in God and sees his pain (and loss of wealth, v. 11b) as divine punishment.

39:12–13. *Hear my prayer*

He ends his lament with a plea to God for help. He is estranged from God and feels like a *stranger* or a *foreigner* to him. He finds himself in the place of his *ancestors* who sinned against God. His call for God to look away from him is not a request for God to abandon him, but to withdraw his discipline (Job 7:17–21). If God does not answer his prayer, he fears he will not last long.

Meaning

The psalmist tried to repress his appeal to God to help him in his suffering, both because he knew that he was being punished by God for his sins, as well as not wanting to seem to be speaking against God in front of evil people. He eventually does speak, and when he does so, he expresses himself respectfully and humbly, recognizing his own human fragility. While we may see a virtuous motivation behind the psalmist’s attempt to be silent, the psalms as a whole do suggest that we can speak boldly to God concerning what is on our heart.

On the other hand, the book of Job and Lamentations 3 both suggest that,

while God allows us to bring our anger and disappointment to him, ultimately, he wants us to endure before him in expectant silence. Job, for instance, is silent after his encounter with God in the whirlwind (Job 42:1–6), while the ‘man of affliction’ (Lam. 3:1) says, ‘It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD’, and he gives the advice: ‘Let him sit alone in silence, for the LORD has laid it on him’ (Lam. 3:26, 28; see vv. 22–33).

New Testament readers are reminded of Jesus as he faced torture and death. Under incredible questioning and false accusations, the Gospel writer informs us that ‘Jesus remained silent and gave no answer’ (Mark 14:61; recalling also Isa. 53:7).

Psalm 40. I desire to do your will

Context

In the final analysis, Psalm 40 is an individual lament, but it opens like a thanksgiving psalm. While in the past scholars argued that this arrangement must have come about through the fusion of two separate poems (Gunkel 1968: 171), the psalm makes sense as it stands. After celebrating a past deliverance, the psalmist turns to God again in the midst of a new crisis and asks God to manifest his love towards him one more time. Interestingly, the second half of the psalm (vv. 13–17) is nearly identical to Psalm 70.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

40:1–3. A new song

The composer reflects on a past time when God answered his prayer for help. He prayed and *waited patiently* (see Ps. 39, *Meaning*) and was rewarded by God's response. He likened his plight to standing on slippery ground (*slimy pit; mud and mire*) and God's rescue to being placed on secure ground (*a rock*; cf. 18:2). He responded with praise. A *new song* is so called because God makes the psalmist's situation new by his intervention. While most uses of 'new song' are in a military context (see Ps. 98:1), this is not explicit here. The psalmist anticipates that, as God's rescue becomes known, it will lead many to put God at the centre of their life (*fear*) and place their confidence in his saving power (*trust*).

40:4–5. Trust God

Those who do put their trust in God will happily find themselves in an advantageous position (*blessed*). The alternative is to put one's trust in arrogant people (*the proud*) or false gods. While, as the prophets teach (Isa. 44:6–23; Jer. 10:1–22), the latter are ultimately impotent, God is uniquely powerful, as he has demonstrated many times.

40:6–8. You want obedience

These three verses are the most difficult in the psalm, especially in the light of its

use in the New Testament (see *Meaning*). Verse 6a (*sacrifice and offering you did not desire*) and verse 6c (*burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require*) seem out of keeping with the Torah, which mandates sacrifices (see particularly Lev. 1 – 7) and often indicates that these sacrifices indeed do please the Lord.^[63] The psalmist contrasts offering sacrifices with obedience to God, stated explicitly in verse 8 (*I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart*) and implied by his statement that he has open ears (v. 6b).^[64] The best understanding, therefore, is that the psalmist is using hyperbole to make an important point. Sacrifices in and of themselves have no value. If one does not obey God from the heart, they are totally useless. The psalmist is not anti-sacrifice, but dramatically urges that obedience to God's law (including the law to offer sacrifices [Lev. 1 – 7]) is what is important (see also Mic. 6:6–8). And then an additional question: what does the psalmist refer to when he says that he has come in response to what *is written about me in the scroll*? The scroll is the law (v. 8), and he has come as a righteous observer of the law.^[65] This meaning would pertain, even if the alternative rendering (see NIV footnote: 'I have come with the scroll written for me') is correct.

40:9–10. *I proclaim your greatness*

God has rescued him from trouble, and he does not keep this good news to himself, but spreads it among the people of God in the congregation (*the great assembly*). The psalmist sees God's salvation as a covenantal act, as indicated by those divine qualities which he extols (*righteousness, faithfulness, love* [or loyalty; *hesed*]).

40:11–13. *Save me!*

The psalmist moves from celebration of past deliverance to an appeal to God to save him from a present crisis. He asks God not to *withhold* his mercy from him, just as he did not withhold his praise from God.^[66] He asks that God's *love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) and *faithfulness* continue to protect him as it had in the past (cf. v. 11b with v. 10). He is in the midst of trouble, trouble that he understands is connected to his own sinful actions (which are as abundant as *the hairs of his head*). He has no resources to save himself (*my heart fails within me*), so he appeals to God to rescue him yet again (v. 13).

40:14–17. *Shame my enemies*

The psalmist's final request is for the wicked to experience shame and for God's people to find joy. He identifies himself as in great need (*I am poor and needy*)

and thus calls on God to rescue him immediately.

Meaning

Psalm 40 reminds us to think of God's past rescues when we are in the midst of a crisis. Thanking God for help already given can instil confidence when we are in what looks like a hopeless situation. The psalmist also reminds us that God desires our heartfelt obedience, not simply ritual. Although Christians don't offer sacrifices, we can find ourselves participating in worship with our bodies, but not our hearts.

The author of Hebrews cites verses 6–8 as it contrasts the sacrifices of the Old Testament with Christ's sacrifice. First, we should note that, in citing the Septuagint version, there are some noticeable differences with the Hebrew text. For instance, rather than 'my ears you have opened' (lit. 'ears you have dug for me'), the New Testament has 'a body you have prepared for me'. This difference does not change the meaning, and we may see that the ears are to the body as a part to the whole. Jesus not only listens and obeys; he offers his whole body as a once-and-for-all sacrifice on our behalf (Cimosa 2010: 439). And he does this great act in fulfilment of Scripture ('it is written about me in the scroll', Heb. 10:7).

Psalm 41. Blessed are those who have regard for the weak

Context

This psalm does not fit neatly into a generic category. Indeed, it depends on how one reads the last stanza. We follow the NIV here, which makes it clear that the psalmist's prayer for help has not yet been answered, although he expresses confidence that it will be. Others believe that this stanza indicates that the prayer has been answered and that the earlier prayer asking for help is cited in verses 4–9. Thus, we take it as a lament of the individual rather than a thanksgiving psalm.

The relationship between the opening stanza and the rest of the psalm is also at issue. We believe the best understanding is that the psalmist, who, in keeping with the title, may be the king (Wilson 2002: 650–651), is pronouncing a blessing on those who take care of the *weak*. The blessing includes the idea that when they are weak God will help them. The psalmist himself, then, was a helper who now needs help. An alternative understanding (Goldingay 2006: 582) is that the first line blesses those who think about the weak (or poor) and they learn the lesson that God takes care of them, rather than (as we take it here) a blessing on those who take care of the weak (or poor), so that when they find themselves weak, God will take care of them. It is also possible that this opening stanza was spoken by a priest before later reporting the prayer of the afflicted (Broyles 1999: 193).

Comment

41:1–3. *Blessed are the caregivers*

The psalmist, who himself is weak (see below), pronounces those who care for the weak⁶⁷ to be blessed. Specifically, he has in mind people who come to the aid of those who are gravely ill (v. 3). God will help those who help the weak by helping them when they are in trouble and weak themselves. He protects them from their enemies and heals them when they are sick. The psalmist probably identifies with those who care for the weak, and now that he himself is weak he hopes that God will sustain him.

41:4–9. Heal me

While the opening stanza states a principle, the rest of the poem is a personal prayer asking God to help the psalmist in his own weak condition. He acknowledges his guilt, but throws himself on God's mercy. He complains about his enemies who exploit his weakness in order to spread *slander* about him (Prov. 11:13; 20:19). He has admitted that he is a sinner, but still they lie about him to destroy his reputation. Although Job, unlike the psalmist, never admitted that sin led to his suffering, he, like the psalmist, experienced 'friends' who spread evil reports about him. They came to him speaking words of comfort (*he speaks falsely*), all the while gathering information (*while his heart gathers slander*) to tell others (*he goes out and spreads it around*).

Verses 7–9 continue the description of the psalmist's detractors. They not only desire him to die (v. 5); they are sure that he will (v. 8). Perhaps most devastating of all, his *close friend* has turned against him and become an *enemy*. This person was someone with whom he ate (*one who shared my bread*), indicating great intimacy. The NIV's *has turned against me* is literally: 'lifted his heel against me' (*higdîl 'ālay 'āqēb*). The idea is that he has abandoned the psalmist and gone over to the enemy, lifting his heel in the psalmist's direction as he walks away.

41:10–12. Have mercy

As he asks God again for mercy (see v. 4), the psalmist is aware that God has not let his enemy *triumph* over him. He is not completely overwhelmed. Even so, healing is still in the future, and when it comes, he will *repay* those who have hurt him so badly (see Introduction: Imprecations, pp. 51–52). Interestingly, although earlier he confessed his sin, he bases his confidence in God's help on his integrity. Perhaps he is like Job after all, knowing he is innocent, though not perfect.

41:13. Doxology

Verse 13 is a doxology that does not end Psalm 41, but rather marks the close of the entirety of Book I of the Psalter (see Introduction, p. 36).

Meaning

The psalm is a call for divine help in the midst of a grave illness. It is also a reminder that those who help the weak are themselves blessed by God: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy' (Matt. 5:7).

Psalm 41 ends Book I of the Psalter, and it has been noted how its opening (*Blessed are those...*) recalls the opening of the first psalm (see 1:1). Goldingay

insightfully notes that, while Psalm 1 pronounces blessing on those who obey God's law, keeping them from trouble, Psalm 41 pronounces blessing on the weak who are in trouble by assuring them of rescue (Goldingay 2006: 589).

David's greater Son, Jesus, experienced the type of betrayal of a close friend reported by the psalmist. Thus, he cites verse 9 in reference to Judas, who betrayed him to the authorities (John 13:18; cf. Matt. 26:21–30), leading to his death on the cross.

BOOK 2: PSALMS 42 – 72

Psalm 42 – 43. Why, my soul, are you downcast

Context

Psalm 42 and 43 almost certainly were originally a single poem. The most telling evidence is the repeated refrain (42:5, 11; 43:5) that binds them together and provides a sense of closure to the composition. In addition, Psalm 43 lacks a title, although it occurs in a section of the Psalter where there are very few orphan psalms. Finally, some ancient manuscripts have the two as a single psalm. That said, we do not know why or when the psalm was divided into two parts. We will treat the psalms together.

Psalm 42 – 43 are clearly a lament of an individual, but the composer expresses longing rather than anger. God seems absent to him, and his enemies persecute and mock him. Furthermore, he is disappointed in himself. Nothing seems to be going right. Thus, he calls on God for help. There is not a definitive turn to confidence and joy or praise at the end of this psalm, but there is an anticipation of such once God does answer his prayer.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

42:1–4. As the deer pants

The psalm begins with one of the most memorable images of the book, a simile where the composer likens his desire for God to a deer's desire for water (see the similar image in 63:1). Then verse 2 continues the image of thirst for God, asking when this spiritual thirst might be assuaged. As we will see, this simile is fuelled by a palpable feeling of divine absence in the midst of attack by others. In other words, the image is not the sentiment of a person who has a satisfying relationship with God that he wants to go deeper, but rather it is an expression of exasperation by someone who feels abandoned by God. His question at the end of verse 2 (*When can I go and meet with [or lit. 'appear before'] God?*) implies that enough is enough; it's high time for God to make his presence known to him again.

The psalmist's depression is such that it is as if his diet is made up of his tears; it is a habitual and necessary part of his daily routine. He is in tears 24/7 (*day and night*). He wants to be sustained by the streams of water that represent God (vv. 1–2), but at present his tears are his *food*.

Those around him (*people*) only intensify his anguish by asking why God seems absent from him. If the book of Job and the characters' retribution theology is any indication, perhaps behind their question is the accusation that the psalmist has done something to drive God away. Their enquiry might mask a different question: 'How did you sin that you are in such pain and God is not there to help you?'

As the psalmist contemplates his present wretched condition (*as I pour out my soul*), he remembers the good old days when his relationship with God was a positive, beneficial one. He remembers how he used to go to the temple (*the house of God*) and experience the unalloyed joy of praising God in the community (*among the festive throng*). The term *festive* points to a religious high point in the calendar (perhaps Passover, Booths or Pentecost) when people would teem into Jerusalem and the sanctuary and pour out their exuberant joy towards God. Such a memory would enhance his emotional pain as he compared his present sadness with past joy.^[68]

42:5. Put your hope in God

Here we have the first of three repetitions of a verse that serves as a refrain and binds Psalms 42 and 43 together. He speaks to himself and questions his emotional state. He tries to talk himself back into a positive state of mind (*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?*). He wonders why he is so depressed and then urges himself to hope, to envision a time when his relationship with God will be restored. He will indeed one day praise God again.

42:6–7. I will remember you

He is depressed (*My soul is downcast within me*), and to counter this feeling he urges himself to remember God, this time in a positive sense.^[69] Note that he must remember God from a distance from Jerusalem and the house of God, the temple, where God makes his presence known in a special way. We don't know why he is separated from God by this physical distance; perhaps the language of physical distance is a metaphor for spiritual distance. In any case, *Hermon* is a mountain to the far north of Israel, on the border and perhaps outside the boundary of Israel, near the location of the headwaters of the *Jordan*. *Mount Mizar* is otherwise unknown, but is perhaps one of the surrounding hills of the

majestic and dominating Hermon.^[70]

In verses 1–2, the psalmist used a water metaphor to express his desire for communion with God. The picture of a stream of water supplying his needs is quite different from the water metaphor in verse 7. The roaring *waterfall* is powerful and dangerous. These waters have waves that sweep over the psalmist. Thus, here, as at the beginning of Psalm 69, the waters represent the chaos of life that threatens to overwhelm him.

42:8. *God is with me*

The psalmist has not lost all hope, and this verse indicates a kind of ambivalence in his relationship with God. The sections before and after raise serious questions about God, but here he states that God is constantly present with him. God directs his love towards him, using a word (*hesed*) that indicates God's covenant loyalty. And in response, he sings and prays to God.

42:9–10. *Divine abandonment*

Now the psalmist questions God directly and asks the 'why' question. Why has God abandoned him? Just as to remember implies more than a cognitive act, so to forget means that God has not acted on the psalmist's behalf. God has not yet come to remedy his difficult situation. And he makes clear here that at least a part of his agony is the result of persecution (*oppressed by the enemy*). Again, his enemies taunt him by asking why God seems absent to him (see v. 3). The fact that his *bones suffer mortal agony* indicates that his suffering runs deep and may also signify that a serious physical ailment is involved.^[71]

42:11. *Put your hope in God*

This is the second expression of the refrain (see v. 5): it articulates the psalmist's pain while also expressing the longing that his sadness will be transformed into hope.

43:1–4. *Vindicate me*

The psalmist has questioned God earlier (v. 9), but here we have the first plea for his help. It is a call for vindication that assumes an accusation, perhaps a formal legal one, since legal language is used here (*vindicate* [šāpāṭ] and *plead my cause* [rîbâ rîbî]). This charge is coming from an unfaithful nation. The term 'unfaithful' is the negative of a cognate (lô'-ḥāsîd) to the word translated 'love' in verse 8. God shows love (loyalty or covenant faithfulness; *hesed*), but the people of the nation do not show that same love or faithfulness to the psalmist.

The fact that a nation is not showing love/faith towards the psalmist does make one wonder whether the Sons of Korah (see title) are composing this hymn on behalf of the king.

The psalmist continues to press God to rescue him from this distress at the hand of the enemy. God is his only possible protection (*my stronghold*), but so far he has not expressed his help. He wants to return to the place (*your holy mountain/the altar of God*) where he can experience the intimate presence of God again and worship him with joy.

43:5. Put your hope in God

The third occurrence of the refrain (see 42:5, 11) brings the psalm to a close, ending with the psalmist's continuing grief, but also a note of hope for transformation.

Meaning

Psalms 42 and 43 were originally a single psalm, an individual lament expressing a deep longing for God who seems absent in the light of persecution by enemies and a disappointment with one's self. The absence seems at least partly, or perhaps largely, a result of being physically separated from the temple, since the psalmist calls to God from *the land of Jordan, the heights of Hermon – from Mount Mizar*. The psalm opens with a striking and memorable image of the psalmist's thirst for God's presence, similar to the thirst of a deer panting for water, and is a model for those who long for a concrete experience of God's presence.

Christians reading this psalm recognize that they can enjoy intimate communion with God through Jesus wherever they are. Unlike the Old Testament, where God made his presence known in special ways in physical places, such as the temple, we can commune with God in any physical place. Christians are filled with the Holy Spirit, and both individually (2 Cor. 6:14–18) as well as corporately (1 Pet. 2:4) we are the very temple of God. Even so, Christians can certainly experience a sense of God's absence and a longing for his presence. Psalms 42 – 43 provide a model prayer for Christians when they desire a more tangible sense of God's presence.

Christians reading the opening of the psalm, where the composer likens his longing for God to a deer's longing for refreshing water, are drawn to John 4, where Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that 'whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (v. 14). In addition, we think of John

7:37–38, where, speaking of the Spirit, Jesus tells the crowd, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.’

Psalm 44. Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?

Context

Psalm 44 can be divided into two main parts. The first part (vv. 1–8) remembers and celebrates God’s great victories on behalf of Israel. The second part (vv. 9–26) bemoans Israel’s present defeat and calls on God to come again as Warrior to save them. Implicitly, the psalmist (the *I* of vv. 4, 6), who represents all the people (the *we* of the rest of the psalm) in this community lament, accuses God of betraying the covenant in which he promised to take care of his people, even as his people have been loyal to him. We do not know the historical event that inspired the original writing of the psalm, since it was written in such a way that it could be used for later, similar occasions.⁷²

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

44:1–3. You won victories for our ancestors

The psalmist recounts God’s great military victories on behalf of Israel. He has heard about them through the stories told by his ancestors who heard about them from their ancestors. In particular, the psalmist has in mind accounts of the conquest of the Canaanites (Josh. 1 – 12), when God defeated them and settled Israel in the land promised to them from the time of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). Although Joshua and the Israelites fought, it was God, their Divine Warrior, who provided the victory. God’s *right hand* and his *arm* frequently indicate God’s warring power (Exod. 6:6; Deut. 4:34), while the light of his face indicates his beneficent attitude towards his people. He did not fight for them because they were special, but because he loved them (Deut. 7:7–11).

44:4–8. You won victories for us

The stanza begins with an affirmation of the Lord as the psalmist’s *King* and *God*. The NIV follows the Septuagint and treats verse 4b as a further definition of the Lord, namely that he is the Warrior who decrees victories for his people (*Jacob*). The Hebrew text has the imperative, with the force of a call to God to ‘command victory for Jacob’ (so REB), and goes on to translate the following verse (5) in the future tense, thus continuing a statement of trust. God will bring

victories to Israel. In the light of the doubts expressed in the second half of the poem, this approach is unlikely. The NIV rightly translates verse 5 in the present tense, thus stating a principle that it is God who provides victories for his people. The stanza ends by affirming the power of the Divine Warrior, an acknowledgment that any military victory is the result of God's power and not that of his people (see also 1 Sam. 17:45–48).

44:9–16. *You have abandoned us*

Although God had won great victories for Israel in the past, the present is a different story. Rather than victory, Israel experiences devastating and humiliating defeats, raising the question about God's love. The psalmist does not attribute their defeats to a more powerful enemy, but rather to the absence of God. Indeed, as the stories of defeats at Ai (Josh. 7), by the Philistines (1 Sam. 4) and especially by the Babylonians (Lam. 3) indicate, God's withdrawal from the battlefield is determinative. They are *devoured like sheep* and *scattered...among the nations*. God is seen as a slave trader, but one who just wants to get rid of a slave and is unconcerned about getting paid (v. 12), thus illustrating a change from love to distaste.

God's treatment of Israel has ruined their reputation. In a shame culture, their humiliation is overwhelming. They are the brunt of people's jokes and the object of their insults. They are a *byword*, a negative example that is put forward so others won't follow (a mocking song; 1 Kgs 9:7; 2 Chr. 7:20; Jer. 24:9; Ezek. 14:8; Joel 2:17). Their enemies are happy because they want revenge.

44:17–19. *We have remained faithful*

God had announced that he would protect Israel if they kept the (Mosaic) *covenant* (Deut. 28:7), but desert Israel if they did not (Deut. 28:25–29). The psalmist protests that they have indeed kept the covenant and therefore deserve to be protected, not abandoned. They do not deserve to have the land turned into a wasteland (*a haunt for jackals*) or be deprived of the light of life (*deep darkness*).

44:20–22. *We face death*

God would know whether they had abandoned proper worship and instead were worshipping (*spread out...hands*) false (*foreign*) gods. After all, there are no secrets from God. Indeed, just the opposite. God's people *face death* every day for the sake of his reputation. They are like sheep presenting themselves for slaughter (see also v. 11).

44:23–26. Awake!

God is acting as if he is asleep (see Ps. 78:65). He needs to wake up and start attacking the enemy. When God makes his face shine or turns his face towards his people, then he acts on their behalf. When he *hides his face*, he withdraws his presence.

God's people are subdued and dying (*brought down to the dust*). The psalmist appeals to God's *unfailing love* (or covenantal loyalty; *hesed*), for God to rise up (see Ps. 7:6) and aid them in their distress.

Meaning

Israel, through the psalmist, complain about God's failure to lead them to victory. The psalm begins by remembering their great victories, particularly at the time of the conquest, thanks to God their Warrior. But now the situation is different, and disturbingly so. As a community, they lament their defeats and turn to God to remedy the situation. If they had sinned against God, they would have deserved it, but far from it, they had remained loyal to the covenant, and now it was God's turn to be loyal to them. They call on God to spring to action on their behalf before they are completely crushed.

Psalm 44 is a psalm that reminds us that we have permission to be bold in our requests to God. Like the individual of Psalm 77, the community here questions God's loyalty and faithfulness. They have upheld their end of the covenant; now it is time for God to uphold his.

Christians can take heart that God will hear our bold, questioning prayers and will answer them. We too can pray to God when our lives are going badly and ask him to come and help us in our trouble. However, the covenant is not a mechanism that thwarts God's freedom. We know that God loves us and will care for us, although that care may not express itself as we think it should.

Accordingly, Paul cites verse 22 of our psalm as part of his strong affirmation that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:31–39; see v. 36). We may be under severe attack, but we are able to face death because 'we are more than conquerors through him who loved us' (Rom. 8:37).

As Jesus hung on the cross, he could have thought this a violation of his relationship with his Father. By all accounts, it looked as if evil was victorious. But, of course, it wasn't. Resurrection followed crucifixion. God had the victory, and now his Son reigns at his right hand.

Psalm 45. A noble theme

Context

The title names this poem ‘a wedding song’, and certainly its content fits the occasion of a royal wedding. The psalm is a kingship psalm and more specifically a love poem, with some connections to the Song of Songs. The poet addresses both the king and his bride and extols both of them, as well as urging them to fulfil their duties as warrior-king and his queen.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

45:1. *My tongue is a pen*

The psalmist here presents himself as a court poet, which is unusual for the Psalter where the speaker expresses himself more like a worship leader. He speaks from the *heart* as he addresses his poem to the king. He writes not with *pen* on parchment, but with his *tongue*. His *noble* (or ‘good’, *tôb*) theme is the king and his queen on the occasion of their wedding day.

45:2–9. *The glory of the groom*

The king has been blessed by God, and for that reason he is *the most excellent of men*. In particular, his speech (*lips*) is gracious.

Verses 3–5 then urge this excellent man to action. He is king, and therefore the protector of the kingdom, the war leader. The psalmist calls on him to be prepared for battle (*gird your sword on your side*), to go forth to strike fear in the hearts of the enemy and win victories over nations that threaten God’s people (*let your sharp arrows pierce the hearts of the king’s enemies*). However, the king is not to wage war in order to grab power for himself. He fights for *truth, humility and justice*, not imperial expansion.

In what is surely the most difficult verse of the poem (v. 6), the poet assures the king of the perpetuation of his dynasty (*your throne...will last for ever and ever*). This assurance is rooted in the covenant that God made with David, which promised him that ‘Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever’ (2 Sam. 7:16). What initially shocks the reader is that the king appears to be addressed as God (*your throne, O*

God, will last for ever and ever; so NIV, also the Septuagint), when the theology of Israel has no room for the concept of a divine king. On the other hand, the king was certainly seen as God, the king's human representative on earth (Ps. 2), who wages war on his behalf. So, with VanGemerén and Goldingay, we understand the reference as elliptical, thus yielding a translation like: 'your throne is a throne of God' (VanGemerén 2008: 399–400; NRSV); or 'your throne, God's, is yours forever and ever' (Goldingay 2007: 58).

As God's royal representative on earth, the Davidic king should be just in his dealings. The *sceptre* was a symbol of kingship and power, and the king should wield it with justice, not showing bias towards anyone. Because the king desires righteousness and hates wickedness, God has granted him his position as king. He has been anointed with the oil of joy. He is indeed the anointed one (the messiah).

Verses 8–9 remind us that the occasion is the king's wedding day, and thus his robes smell of the most expensive and fragrant spices (*myrrh and aloes and cassia*). His high status is indicated by the presence of *daughters of kings*, but most pointedly by his bride, who stands in the place of honour (*your right hand*), dressed in the most precious gold (that of *Ophir*; Gen. 10:29; 1 Kgs 9:28; 10:11; 22:48, and so on). The exact location of Ophir (Arabia, India and Sri Lanka have all been suggested) is unknown.

45:10–15. The glory of the bride

The king's bride is now instructed to *forget* her people and her father's house and to honour her husband. That the woman here must leave her past balances Genesis 2:24, which instructs husbands to leave their parents as the first step in marriage. The point is that a newly married couple, whether royal or common, must form a new primary loyalty with each other. As the bride unites with the king, she herself will assume a high status, so that even the wealthy city of Tyre will bring her gifts.

Verse 13 turns from addressing the princess to speaking about her. She is strikingly beautiful in her wedding dress, accompanied by her bridesmaids (v. 14). With joy, they enter the king's palace.

45:16–17. The king's legacy

The poet now addresses the king again (the pronominal suffix is masculine singular) and assures him that his sons, the issue of his marital union with his bride, will succeed him on the throne. Again, we have an allusion to the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:11b–16). Thanks to the efforts of the composer (*I will*

perpetuate your memory), the king will be remembered in perpetuity and the nations will honour him.

Meaning

This wedding song addresses the royal groom and his bride on the occasion of their wedding. The allusions to the Davidic covenant (see *Comment*) make it clear that it was composed by a poet on the occasion of the wedding of a Davidic king, but we do not know which one. The mention of Tyre has led some to believe that the bride was from that city, but we know of no marriage between a Davidic king and a Tyrian princess. In any case, the psalm not only celebrates a wedding, but also highlights the virtues of a godly king and a virtuous wife. It also celebrates marriage, but note the opulence and solemnity of the ceremony itself. Thus, the poem extols marriage itself, whether of a royal couple or not.

The Davidic kingship reflects God's cosmic kingship. It also anticipates Jesus the Messiah. He is David's greater Son and the ultimate fulfilment of God's promise to David that he will have a son on the throne forever (2 Sam. 7). Jesus is the groom and his church is the bride (Eph. 5:25–32). For this reason, the author of Hebrews (1:8–9, citing the Septuagint, rather than the MT), taking the vocative in verse 6 (*your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever*), cites verses 6–7 in reference to Christ, who is greater than the angels.

Psalm 46. An ever-present help

Context

Psalm 46 is a hymn that focuses on Zion (and thus may be rightly considered a Zion hymn; see also Pss 48, 76, 84, 87, 122 and perhaps 137, although the latter has a different tone) as the place where God makes his presence known to his people. The psalm may also be called a psalm of confidence, in that it expresses trust in God in the midst of great turmoil. God's presence assures his people of protection from their enemies. The psalm is marked by a repeated refrain that brings the main message to the fore: *The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress* (vv. 7, 11).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

46:1–3. We will not fear

Verse 1 states the principle that infuses the entire poem. God is Israel's protection in the face of opposition. He is like a *refuge* where people flee when trouble arises. He is an *ever-present* help. The term 'ever-present' translates a Hebrew phrase (*nimṣā' mē'ōd*) that may be woodenly translated 'is found greatly'. Therefore, it is an intensifying phrase, well rendered by 'ever-present', although it could conceivably be 'well proved' (see NRSV alternative).

Verses 2–3 state the consequences of God's presence with his people, namely, that the psalmist and his community (we) will not fear, even in the most dire circumstances. The psalmist utilizes the well-known images of mountains and waters to communicate the most formidable trouble possible. While mountains are images of security and permanence, the waters are forces of chaos. Thus, to envision the mountains being overwhelmed by the waters is a metaphor that points to the ultimate nightmare, or, as we might say today, 'All hell is breaking loose!'

46:4–7. God is with us

The first stanza uses the metaphor of unruly waters overwhelming the land, even the mountains, to depict utter chaos, but in the second stanza the waters are under control, *a river* whose streams make glad the city of God. The *city of God*

is Jerusalem, where the temple is located on the heights of Zion. It is a holy, or consecrated, place, because God (*the Most High*) makes his presence known there. Thus, it is a symbol of God's presence with his people, and God's presence assures the city's safety. Jerusalem does not have, and never had, a river running through it, so this river is figurative, not literal. The river symbolizes the spiritual sustenance that God's presence provides. If a river actually ran through the city, its presence would enhance the city's security. Indeed, Jerusalem's water supply was always a concern during a prolonged siege. So the poet uses this image of the river to make the point that God's presence enhances the security of the city.

While the first stanza depicts chaos figuratively, the second stanza describes it in political-military terms. The language of *nations* in an uproar and *kingdoms* falling presume warfare. But God is in control of such chaos, and all he has to do is speak (*he lifts his voice*) and these contentious nations are no more (*the earth melts*).

Verse 7 is the first iteration of a refrain that brings the stanza to a close, by reaffirming God's presence with his people that protects them from attack.

46:8–11. *Be still*

The psalmist then invites his hearers to witness God's work, his work of desolation (connecting back to v. 6b where his voice melts the earth). He makes wars cease by destroying the opposing army. He is, after all, the Divine Warrior who protects his people from attack (Longman and Reid 1995: 52–53). That he makes wars cease is indicated by his destroying weapons and armour (*bow, spear, shields* ⁷³).

In verse 10, the poet quotes God, who asserts his sovereignty not only over Israel, but over all the nations of the earth. He commands that their uproar be silenced and that they all recognize that he is God.

The second occurrence of the refrain (v. 11; see v. 7) brings the second stanza and indeed the whole psalm to a conclusion.

Meaning

Psalm 46 is a hymn that celebrates God's presence in the midst of Jerusalem. Although it does not mention Zion explicitly, it points to the holy place where the Most High dwells, which is Zion. Thus, along with Psalms 48, 76, 84, 87 and 137, Psalm 46 is a Zion hymn.

The thesis that God's presence on Zion brings protection to the city and its people must be appropriated by faith; otherwise, it becomes presumption. The

Israelites learned the latter, as proclaimed by Jeremiah, when they assumed that the mere presence of God's dwelling in the city secured it from harm from the Babylonians. In his temple sermon, Jeremiah mocked those who looked upon the temple as a talisman against defeat (Jer. 7:4). God could abandon his house (and did; see Ezek 9 – 11). After all, although the temple was a tangible sign that God was in their midst, it was God, not the temple itself, who served as Israel's defence.

Christians who read this psalm believe that God no longer makes his special presence known in Jerusalem or, for that matter, in any specific physical location. Jesus taught that the temple would be destroyed. He said, 'I will raise it up again in three days' (John 2:19), which the disciples later realized was a reference to the resurrection. In other words, Jesus saw himself as the very presence of God, rendering a building representing God's presence on earth obsolete (see also John 1:14). The tearing of the curtain of the temple at the time of Jesus' death also indicates the breaking forth of God's holy presence throughout the world (Matt. 27:51). In other words, when faced with the chaos of life, the Christian reader of the psalm finds confidence in Christ's presence with them ('surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age', Matt. 28:20). Martin Luther surely read the psalm this way and was inspired to write, 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God', which answers the question of the source of God's protective strength in our lives by pronouncing in the second stanza, 'Christ Jesus, it is he.'

Finally, above we remarked that the picture of Jerusalem with a river running through it was not describing actual Jerusalem, but presenting a metaphor of provision and protection. In the book of Revelation, in a passage perhaps anticipated by Ezekiel 47:1–12, heaven is described as the new Jerusalem, where 'the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal' flows 'from the throne of God and of the Lamb' (22:1).

Psalm 47. Proclaiming God as King

Context

Psalm 47 is a hymn that celebrates God as King not just over Israel, but over all the earth. He establishes his kingship by his victory over the nations, forcing them to recognize him as King. He ascends the throne accompanied by the sounds of trumpets and human voices.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

47:1. *Clap your hands*

In the preceding psalm, God announced that he will be exalted by the nations (46:10); here, the psalmist calls on all the nations (or ‘peoples’; *‘ammîm*) to do exactly that. The praise is exuberant, with shouts and hand clapping. That the psalmist calls on all the nations to worship indicates God’s sovereignty not only over Israel, but over all people. Of course, he is the only God, the Creator of all, the One who called Abraham to reach ‘all peoples [lit. families] on earth’ (Gen. 12:3).

47:2–4. *God the King*

The second stanza (beginning with *for* [*kî*]) now gives the reason for praise. God is *Most High*, an epithet that indicates that he is above all others, including any other god (see Ps. 83:18). He is the King *over all the earth*. As King, he is sovereign and holds all things under his power. As King, he is due homage and obedience. Verse 3 indicates that he has established his kingship through his warring activities. The picture of God placing Israel’s enemies under their feet could be a metaphor for utter domination, although Joshua had his army commanders literally put their feet on the necks of five defeated Amorite kings before having them executed (Josh. 10:16–27). Thus, the nations’ praise for God issues from his domination over them, indicating that Israel is God’s people. God gave them the land, as we learn from the book of Joshua, which describes the conquest and the settlement (*He chose our inheritance for us*). The land of Israel is called *the pride of Jacob*, Jacob of course being the patriarch whose name was changed to Israel after fighting with God (Gen. 32:22–32). Here God loves *the*

pride of Jacob, but in Amos 6:8 God declares his hatred for the *pride of Jacob*, because of their sin (see also Amos 8:7 where the phrase stands for God himself who is Israel's pride).

47:5–7. *God ascends to his throne*

The third stanza begins with a description of God ascending, accompanied with shouts of joy and the sound of *trumpets* (or rams' horns; *šôpār*) blaring. While the text does not specify the place to which he ascends, the proclamation of his kingship indicates that he is going up to his throne on a raised dais. Thus, the heavenly King mounts his throne accompanied by music and the sung praises of his people. He is, after all, the King of all the earth.

47:8–9. *God reigns over the nations*

Verse 8 confirms our intuition that God was ascending to his throne, since in the final stanza he is pictured as seated on that throne ruling the nations. God is not just the God of Israel, but of the whole world. All the kings of the earth owe him obeisance. And thus, the leading citizens of all the nations (*the nobles*) gather before him as if they were the people of the God of Abraham, namely Israel.

Meaning

Psalms 47 is a kingship hymn depicting God's enthronement because of his warring activity and his subduing the nations so that they recognize his sovereignty over them. The picture of God being enthroned in this psalm should not be taken, as it has in the past (Mowinckel, 1921–1924), as a sign that there was an annual ritual where God was proclaimed King, but as a figurative means of celebrating God's greatness and domination. In other words, God was not becoming King for the first time. As Psalm 93:2 puts it, 'Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity.' That said, it is true that military victory, which seems to be the background of this psalm, allows an occasion to celebrate God's kingship anew (see Exodus 15:1–18 which combines a celebration of God's defeat at the Red Sea with a proclamation of his kingship; Miller 1973: 274).

The picture of the kings of the nations, described as in an uproar in Psalm 2, submitting to the sovereignty of Israel's God as universal King was an act of theological imagination. Certainly, as the God of all, he deserved this worship, but except for occasional and temporary moments (see Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Daniel), the pagan kings never acknowledged this truth. Psalm 48 will continue this theme of God's dominance over a united front of rebellious kings

(see vv. 4–7).

The New Testament describes a time when God's universal reign in Christ will be recognized, beginning with the ascension. Quoting Psalm 68:18 rather than Psalm 47, Paul applies the picture of God's victorious return to heaven to Jesus who ascends on high with captives in his train (Eph. 4:7–10).

This victory is an already-not yet reality, since evil powers remain that are still active. The book of Revelation looks forward to the day when this vision will become a full reality. Revelation 19:11 – 22:15 anticipates the day when the Messiah (the anointed King) will come and defeat all the evil human and spiritual powers who resist him. He will judge them as King, seated on a 'great white throne' (Rev. 20:11).

Psalm 48. Zion, like Zaphon

Context

This psalm is a hymn that praises God by praising Zion (see also Pss 46, 76, 84, 87, 122), the place where God has made his presence known among his people. After all, the temple, representing God's presence in the city, was located there, and his presence renders the city invulnerable to attack. Thus, the psalm ridicules the attempts of foreign rulers who think they might defeat it.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

48:1. *Worthy of praise*

The psalm begins with the simple, yet profound, affirmation that the Lord is great, and because he is great, he is worthy of worship (see the similar statement in 96:4). That worship centres on the *holy mountain*, which is Zion, on which stands the temple, the place where God makes his presence known most intensely among his people. The presence of the temple on Zion is what makes Jerusalem *the city of our God*.

48:2–3. *Beautiful Zion*

The next stanza now reflects on the magnificence of Mount Zion and the city of Jerusalem in which it is located. The reason for the city's beauty is God's presence within it (v. 3). From the description of the temple in 1 Kings 7, we can well imagine its beauty as it was perched over the city. Although there is a debate about the correct translation of the second parallel line in verse 2, in our opinion the NIV gets it right in noting the comparison between Zion and another mountain named *Zaphon*. Modern readers often miss the significance of Zaphon, but research into the time when the psalm was written reveals that Zaphon was a sacred mountain among the Canaanites because it was the location of the house of their god Baal. As the historical books, particularly Kings, make clear, many Israelites were tempted to worship Baal, and the comparison is a way of attacking the worship of Baal. Why bother with Zaphon and its god, when the Lord dwells on Zion right in the midst of Jerusalem? ⁷⁴ Verse 3 not only makes clear that Zion's importance lies generally in God's presence, but in his presence

as one who protects the city from attack. He is in the *citadels*, which are defensive structures, and he himself is a *fortress*.

48:4–7. *The attacking nations*

God's protection of the city is described in the next stanza in language similar to that found in Psalm 2. Both psalms mock the futility of foreign kings who think they might overwhelm the city of Jerusalem. Since God is their fortress, all it takes is a look to send attackers running. The poet applies the well-known simile of trembling *like a woman in labour* to these pretentious rulers. However, rather than giving birth, God destroys them like the mighty *ships off Tarshish* that are torn apart by a vicious *east wind*. While the location and significance of Tarshish (the Phoenician colony of Tartessos in Spain?) are uncertain, the ships of Tarshish are clearly large, long-distance trading ships (1 Kgs 10:22; Jer. 10:9; Ezek. 27:25).

48:8. *The city of our God*

This verse sums up the confidence that the psalmist places in God's protection of the city. They have *heard* that God is present in the city, and they have *seen* it demonstrated as the city withstood attack. As long as God is in the city, nothing can cause it to fall (see below under *Meaning*).

48:9–11. *God's unfailing love*

The psalm has reflected on the presence of the temple in the city and now looks within the temple complex where the people worship. They meditate on God's *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *hesed*), a love that is based on the covenant relationship and that issues forth in the loyalty God shows his faithful people.

48:12–14. *Consider Zion*

The psalmist then invites the hearers (readers) to look and judge for themselves. He is confident that an inspection of *Zion*, here standing not just for the temple mount but also the city, will confirm what he has been saying. The truth is self-evident: the city is beautiful and impregnable, reflecting the presence of God in its midst. Such an invitation is reminiscent of the end of the eleventh Tablet of Gilgamesh, where Gilgamesh, after failing to achieve immortality, sees the walls of the city of Uruk and marvels at their beauty, inviting Urshanabi, the boatman, to join with him in the celebration. The psalmist's hope is that his hearers will not only be inspired for themselves, but will pass the tradition down to the generations to come, something he himself accomplishes through the poem

itself.

The final verse (v. 14) is a reminder that, although the city has been the focus of attention, the praise of the city really serves the purpose of praising God who will be Israel's God and *guide* forever (taking the MT *'al-mût* as a corruption of a form of *'ôlām*; see Septuagint [*eis tous aiōnas*]).

Meaning

The psalm extols Jerusalem, the city which encompasses Mount Zion, the place where the temple is located. The praise of Jerusalem and Zion is really a way of praising God himself. The same phenomenon may be observed in Sumerian hymns dedicated to a temple, like the Kesh temple hymn^[75] and the 'Hymn to Ekur', the magnificent temple dedicated to Enlil at Nippur.^[76]

Zion, and Jerusalem in which it is located, is beautiful because of the presence of God in its midst, as indicated by the temple. God's presence renders Jerusalem impregnable, as the psalm makes clear, particularly in verse 8.

However, as the historical books indicate, Israel grew presumptuous about God's protection of the city. They reasoned that if God was in the city, then he would not allow anything to happen to it, no matter how they behaved. They should have known better, though, since, even at the temple's dedication, Solomon made it absolutely clear that God does not really live in the temple. After all, 'The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!' (1 Kgs 8:27). Jeremiah highlighted their presumption in his temple sermon (Jer. 7), and Ezekiel described God's abandonment of the temple (Ezek. 9 – 11) on the eve of the building's destruction by the Babylonians. After the city was devastated and the temple destroyed, the author of Lamentations bemoans the sad condition of the city, even alluding to Psalm 48:

All who pass your way
clap their hands at you;
they scoff and shake their heads
at Daughter Jerusalem:
'Is this the city that was called
the perfection of beauty,
the joy of the whole earth?'
(Lam. 2:15)

The temple was indeed rebuilt some decades later, after the Persians allowed a return of the exiles to Jerusalem, but this temple too was destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans. To Christians, the ultimate expression of God's presence on earth is not a building, but a person: Jesus Christ. Among the many New Testament

passages that connect Jesus to the temple, we can quote John 1:14: ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.’⁷⁷

Psalm 49. God will redeem me from the realm of death

Context

Many features associate Psalm 49 with wisdom. Indeed, the first stanza uses many categories linked with wisdom (see *Comment*), but most importantly the psalm deals with a question with which the sages struggled. Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous languish? That the foolish rich come to a bad end is emphasized by the twice-recurring refrain of verses 12 and 20.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

49:1–4. *Words of wisdom*

The psalmist calls on his hearers to pay attention to his words. His audience includes all who live in the world, regardless of social (*low and high* ⁷⁸) or economic (*rich and poor*) status. The accumulation of wisdom categories (*words of wisdom, meditation, understanding, proverb, riddle*) shows that his meditation is that of a sage. He will deal with an issue that plagued wisdom: Why do the wicked prosper more than the righteous (see Pss 37; 73; Eccl. 7:15–18; cf. Jer. 12:1)? This is the riddle to which he proposes an answer. Interestingly, he sets his exploration to music accompanied by the *harp*.

49:5–12. *All die*

The psalmist must have struggled with the success of the wicked. They are rich and feel that their wealth is their protection. He addresses his anxiety by reminding himself (and his hearers) that wealth cannot protect anyone from death. He uses an economic term (*ransom*) to argue that no-one can be saved from death. If a person gets into debt, a friend or relative can pay to get them out of debt. If someone is convicted of a crime, under certain circumstances, they can pay a ransom and receive a lesser penalty (Exod. 21:30; implied by the prohibition of a ransom for murder in Num. 35:31–32). But no-one can ransom another or themselves⁷⁹ from death. Everyone will die, both wise and foolish. The Teacher recognizes this truth as well, although it depresses him (Eccl. 2:12–16); the psalmist is encouraged by the fact that the proud rich will not escape the

ultimate fate. The foolish rich attempt to make their name well known and long lasting through the acquisition of land, but still they will die and dwell not in their lands, but in their *tombs* (based on a slight emendation; MT has ‘inward [thoughts]’, which does not make sense in the context).

Verse 12 puts the rich in their place by stating a general principle. People, even rich ones, do not live forever. They die and in this way are no different from animals (*beasts*; see Eccl. 3:18–21).

49:13–19. *Death comes to the wealthy*

Most of this stanza drives home the lesson that the riches of the wicked will not save them from death. They trust themselves (not God), so rather than God as their shepherd guiding them through life, personified death will lead them. God leads his sheep through ‘the darkest valley’ (including death; Ps. 23:4); death leads its sheep to the slaughter and ultimately to Sheol, the underworld.

Glimpses of the afterlife are rare in the Old Testament, but the psalmist here certainly affirms that, in the case of the upright, and specifically himself, death will not have the ultimate say. While no-one (wise or foolish) can pay a ransom for their life or the life of another, God can pay that ransom (*God will redeem me*) and free a person from *the realm of the dead*. The psalmist’s hope here is not simply a long life (after all, the wicked rich might live long, and he knows he will die), but rather a life forever with God. Thus, why should he or anyone care that someone is rich in this life? *They will take nothing with them when they die*. The psalmist’s perspective here is reflected by the sage in Proverbs 11:4: ‘Riches do not profit on the day of fury, but righteousness will extricate from death.’^[80]

49:20. *Like beasts*

Since the foolish rich think they have it better than the righteous, they are ignorant like an animal, and like an animal they will perish.

Meaning

The wicked fools of the world seem to prosper and lord it over the righteous wise. The wealthy intimidate others. They boast in their riches and trust their wealth to save them. The wise psalmist reassures himself and others that their riches will not save them from the ultimate threat, namely death. On the other hand, God will redeem him (and others like him) from death, so that he will live with God forever.

The psalm continues to assure God’s people that, even though they might not prosper in this world, God cares for them and will save them from death. The

psalm is a rare glimpse in the Old Testament of the hope of the afterlife for God's people, but it is just a glimpse.⁸¹ We do not hear much detail at all. While there is still mystery, Christian readers do have a fuller understanding. For one thing, we know how death was defeated. The psalm said that no-one could pay a ransom for himself or another to be delivered from death, although, amazingly, God could redeem a person. The New Testament shows that it is Jesus Christ, who offered his life for us, that pays the ransom and redeems us from death. Jesus told his disciples that 'the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matt. 20:28; cf. Mark 10:45; 1 Tim. 2:6). According to the book of Hebrews, Jesus 'has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant' (9:15).

Psalm 50. He is a God of justice

Context

Most psalms are prayers to God, but this psalm is a divine oracle in which God addresses humanity and in particular his covenant people. As Goldingay points out, this psalm could be labelled prophetic: ‘if Ps. 50 came anywhere else it would be one of the prophetic books’ (Goldingay 2007: 110). The first stanza (vv. 1–6) describes God’s appearance and his call to bring his people into his presence for judgment. God then brings charges against Israel and, in particular, those who outwardly act as if they were obeying him by offering sacrifices, but who break the law on other matters. He calls them back to proper covenant observance, while praising those who do obey him.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

50:1–6. *Gather to me*

God makes an appearance in order to render judgment among the people of the earth. The psalm opens with a list of divine names (*The Mighty One, God, the LORD*). He makes his appearance from *Zion*, the location of the temple, the place where he makes his presence known on earth. Because of God’s presence, it is *perfect in beauty* (Ps. 48:2; Lam. 2:15). His appearance is terrifying and forebodes judgment. *Fire* burns before him as he advances, and a terrific storm (*tempest*) brews all around him: ‘God is like “a consuming fire” (cf. Dt. 4:24; 9:3; Isa. 66:16; Heb. 12:29) when he comes in judgment. In his anger he may storm like a “tempest” (cf. Isa 66:15)’ (VanGemen 2008: 428). While his summons goes out to all the earth, it is particularly his people, Israel, whom he targets. They are consecrated to him through the *covenant* that he made with them. This is the Mosaic covenant that marked Israel as his holy people (Exod. 19:5–6) and was confirmed by a sacrifice. It may refer to the sacrifice that Moses offered to affirm Israel’s acceptance of the law (Exod. 24:5–8) or the sacrifices mandated by the Mosaic covenant that were to be continually offered to him (Lev. 1 – 7). The *heavens proclaim his righteousness* (Ps. 19:1), and he is *just*, thus assuring the world, and Israel in particular, of fair judgment. The heavens and earth were witnesses to the covenant between God and Israel (Deut.

30:19) and are now being summoned to attend the trial (v. 4).

50:7–13. *I don't need your sacrifices*

In the Ancient Near East, the gods depended on the people's sacrifices for food. When the flood stopped the giving of sacrifices, the gods nearly starved (Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh Epic). But the God of Israel is different. He does not eat food like human beings, and if he did, he could have supplied his own food, since every living creature belongs to him. After all, he created everything and everyone. In any case, Israel did offer *sacrifices*, and they were ever before him. He would not charge them with negligence of the sacrificial ritual.

50:14–21. *You are evil*

Even though God did not need the sacrifices for food, he still required them from his repentant and obedient people. If they remained obedient, then God would indeed take care of them, and in turn they would worship (*honour*) him. However, apparently not everyone in the covenant community was obedient. God now has a message for the wicked person in their midst. He hates their hypocrisy. They speak as though they are good members of the covenant community, but really they are egregious sinners. They join with other sinners who steal and commit adultery. They break the ninth commandment by lying, slander and false witness in court. When they did not suffer any consequences for their sin, they thought God didn't care (v. 21). But now he charges them with their crimes.

50:22–23. *Honour me*

The psalmist ends with a direct appeal to the wicked (*those who forget God*). They are to consider what they are doing and presumably repent. If they do not, then they will be destroyed by God's judgment. On the other hand, the obedient (*those who sacrifice thank-offerings/the blameless*) will experience God's salvation.

Meaning

The psalm brings a charge of covenant-breaking against evil people in the midst of Israel. While some are obedient, others disobey. Some offer sacrifices with a pure heart, while others do so just for show. The covenant was a legal metaphor for the relationship between God and his people. He is the great King and they are his vassal people. As a legal agreement, the covenant had witnesses (the

heavens and earth), and God now appears to bring a case against these sinners in order to call judgment upon them. The laws of the covenant were sanctioned by blessings and curses (see e.g. Deut. 27 – 28), and these sinners were about to experience the latter. The psalm does end with a final appeal to covenant-breakers to remember God before they are destroyed.

Christians too are in covenant relationship with God in the new covenant established by Jesus (Luke 22:20; Heb. 8; 10:15–16). Psalm 50 reminds us not to fall into an empty ritualism, but to maintain a vibrant and obedient relationship with God.

Psalm 51. Forgive me, Lord

Context

The psalmist's appeal to God for forgiveness of his sins is one of the most memorable in the book, due, perhaps in part, to the historical title (see Introduction) that situates its composition by David after Nathan the prophet confronted him about his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12). While the words of this prayer fit that occasion well, we should note that nowhere is this particular historical event mentioned specifically, indicating that the poem was written not to memorialize that moment, but to serve as a model prayer for others coming later who find themselves in similar, though not identical, circumstances.

The psalm is a lament, defined as a prayer uttered when one's life is in turmoil. More specifically, the psalmist realizes that his disoriented life is a result of his own sin, and thus he asks God to forgive him and restore his relationship, based on his repentance. As such, in the history of interpretation, this psalm and those like it (besides Ps. 51, they include Pss 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, 143) are known as penitential psalms.

That said, the psalm takes an interesting turn in the last two verses (vv. 18–19). Rather than an individual asking for the restoration of his relationship with God, the psalmist asks for the restoration of the community. Two possible explanations may be given for this turn. The first recognizes that the original individual, the composer, is the king (David), and that his own situation is bound up with that of the community. The more likely explanation is that these verses were added later in Israel's history, perhaps specifically in the post-exilic period (see commentary below).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

51:1–2. Have mercy on me

The psalmist starts by appealing to God for help. The NIV represents the chiastic structure (A B B' A') of the first verse. The first and last cola (A and A') make the appeal, while the middle cola (B and B') state the basis on which the appeal is made. The psalmist begins by asking God to adopt a merciful attitude towards him, and he ends the verse by requesting a specific action emanating from that

attitude, that is, to *blot out* his transgression. Although the title would identify that transgression as David's adultery with Bathsheba, the psalm does not specify, because this psalm is a template for others to use David's prayer as their own. The psalmist grounds the appeal not in anything that he has done, but rather in the character of God, who exhibits *unfailing love* (*hesed*, a word that could also be translated 'loyalty') and *great compassion*. Both of these characteristics are grounded in the covenant that God made with Israel and are cited in God's great statement of self-definition found in Exodus 34:6 and elsewhere. Verse 2 continues the appeal for God to remove the psalmist's transgression, this time using the metaphor of washing. Sin has made him dirty, and he wants to be clean.

51:3–6. *I am a sinner*

The following verses express the motivation (signalled by *for* [כִּי]) for his appeal, which of course is his sin. He is aware of his sin and acknowledges it, a prerequisite for restoration. Interestingly, he states that his sin is exclusively against God. This statement raises questions about the historical title. If the sin in mind is adultery with Bathsheba, the transgression involved others besides God – Bathsheba and certainly Uriah, who died because of David's attempt to cover up his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11). Perhaps this statement is to be taken as a hyperbolic recognition that, as horrible as the consequences are to human beings, the most egregious part of sin is the rebellion against God. Again, the psalm, although inspired by the David and Bathsheba event, is not restricted to that event, since it is written for community use, but the principle still stands for all sins. Sin typically has ramifications for the people around us, but the psalmist reminds us that, as bad as that is, the worse offence is against God. In any case, on the basis of his recognition that he has sinned against God, he also affirms the fact that God is correct to offer his judgment. A contrast here can be drawn with Job, who correctly denied that he was properly the recipient of divine judgment.

Verse 5 continues the use of hyperbolic language when the psalmist states that he has been sinful from the beginning. In a classic A, what's more, B parallelism, verse 5a states that his sin was manifest even on the day of his birth, but then the B colon takes it back to the moment of conception. Thus, the psalmist owns the fact that he is a sinner. It would be wrong, however, to use this hyperbolic poetic verse as a proof-text for the doctrine of original sin. Verse 6 points out that he had the responsibility and the resources to resist sin, in that God required faithfulness and had also taught him wisdom from the beginning.

51:7–9. *Cleanse me*

The psalmist reiterates his request to be cleansed of his sin, beginning with the idea that he be cleansed with *hyssop*. Hyssop is a general term for a type of partially woody plant. The background to this reference is its use in the Pentateuch in rituals that remove ceremonial and moral sin, including the ritual of the red heifer (Num. 19:6, 18) and rituals that deal with impurity caused by skin disease and mildew (Lev. 14:4, 6, 49, 51, 52). In addition, a branch of hyssop was used to smear blood on the top and sides of the doorframes of the Israelites, in anticipation of the coming of the angel of death on the eve of the Passover. In these passages, we can see the connection between hyssop and the purgation of sin. Verse 7b capitalizes on the bright white snow to indicate just how clean God can render the sinner if he so chooses. Verse 9 also appeals to God to remove, or at least not pay attention to (*hide your face from*), his sins. The result would be utter joy. The reference to his crushed bones (v. 8b) reveals that he has experienced painful consequences for his transgression.

51:10–12. *Restore me*

Until now, the psalmist has focused on the removal of his sin and its consequences, but in verse 10 he asks for something positive: a *pure heart* and a *steadfast spirit*. He realizes that this new disposition is utterly necessary for him to avoid sin in the future, and he also acknowledges that he, a person steeped in sin, is not capable of such transformation of character without divine help. Indeed, such a change requires divine intervention. He even uses the verb *create* (*bārā'*), which is best known from Genesis 1 and the creation of the cosmos and humanity. While the commonly held view that this verb implies a creation from nothing is incorrect, it is correct that God is the subject in all its occurrences.

What frightens the psalmist more than anything is that God might abandon him because of his sin. His attitude here is reminiscent of Moses' appeal to God not to withdraw his presence from Israel in the aftermath of the sin with the golden calf (Exod. 33:12–22). While Christians have a propensity to understand *Holy Spirit* (v. 11b) as a reference to the third person of the Trinity (and little damage is done by so doing), Old Testament readers of this psalm would have thought of this as a reference to God, who is a spirit and is holy.⁸² He wants to feel the joy of a healthy relationship with God again and he desires a *steadfast* (v. 10b) and *willing* (v. 12b) *spirit* in order to keep from sinning again.

51:13–17. *A contrite heart*

The psalmist then indicates the positive outcomes that will flow from his

forgiveness. As a forgiven sinner, he can appeal to other sinners to turn back from their wayward life and restore their relationship with God. Further, he can join the throng who offer praise to God. We should note that he does mention a particular sin here, one of bloodshed, which conceivably reflects the death of Uriah in the event that motivated the composition of this prayer in the first place.

Verses 16–17 offer some difficulties of interpretation. On the surface, it seems to say that God does not want animal sacrifices. If he did, then the psalmist would bring one. Instead of animal sacrifice, God desires a broken and contrite heart, that is, a heart saddened by sin and ready to disown it and turn away from it.

The difficulty arises because such a statement seems to put the psalmist at odds not only with other parts of the Old Testament (e.g. Lev. 1 – 7), but with the final verse of this psalm. While some pit this psalm (and other similar statements [see Ps. 50:8–13; Isa. 66:1–4; Mic. 6:6–7]) against priestly theology, it is better to see yet another case of hyperbole that also indicates what is really important to God. The whole Bible is united in the idea that sacrificial ritual in and of itself does not effect restoration of relationship with God. Rather, the sacrifice of an animal must reflect a heartfelt acknowledgment that the sinner deserves the death experienced by the animal.

51:18–19. *Prosper Zion*

As mentioned in the *Context*, the last two verses of the psalm go in a surprising direction. Rather than calling on God to forgive him, the speaker calls on God to *prosper* (or perhaps restore) the city of Jerusalem (*Zion* often stands for the city) and its *walls*. If we do take the psalm as Davidic, it is possible, if not likely, that these verses were added later in the history of Israel, perhaps during the exilic or post-exilic period. That may be why sacrifice is mentioned. The restoration of the city means that the destroyed temple would be rebuilt and the offering of sacrifices could begin again, to God's great delight.

Meaning

In Psalm 51, the composer appeals to God, who is merciful and compassionate, to forgive his sins and restore and sustain a healthy relationship with him. The psalm was written for worshippers as a model prayer of penitence and gives hope that God will indeed forgive sins. This psalm remains relevant to Christians as they too approach God to ask for his forgiveness and restoration. The prayer serves as a reminder that such restoration depends on God's grace and that he responds not to the mere motions of ritual (sacrifice), but to authentic repentance

(a broken and contrite heart). Christians also read and use this psalm, mindful that our forgiveness is based on the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Psalm 52. I am like an olive tree

Context

Psalm 52 shares traits with a number of different genres, but in the final analysis it is a psalm of confidence. Like a lament, it acknowledges hardship. The composer addresses an evil person, who celebrates the destruction he leaves behind him. However, in spite of the threat, the psalmist knows that the evildoer will be uprooted (v. 5), while the psalmist himself is (and will continue to be) like an *olive tree*: productive, healthy and alive. Thus, the psalmist praises God for what he has done for him.

The title names Doeg the Edomite as the evil person. His story is found in 1 Samuel 21:7; 22:6–23. David had fled from Saul, who irrationally believed that David was trying to depose him. He stopped at the holy site of Nob, where he deceived the priest Ahimelek into giving him food and also the sword of Goliath. The narrator mentions briefly that a man named Doeg the Edomite was present at the time (1 Sam. 21:7). Later (1 Sam. 22:6–23), he informed Saul of this encounter, resulting in the death of eighty-five priests. According to the historical title, this event inspired the writing of Psalm 52. Even so, the psalm is historically non-specific, so it could be used in later, similar, but not identical, situations.

For the rest of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

52:1–4. *You mighty hero*

The psalmist blasts this evil person, sarcastically calling him a *mighty hero*, but in reality, he is a disgrace to God because of his wicked actions. Doeg (see *Context*) fits this picture well. However, the psalm is written not as a historical remembrance, but for use in later, similar, though not necessarily identical, situations. It is through speech (*your tongue*) that this evil person works destruction on others. His speech is lethal like a *sharpened razor*, in that it cuts people to the quick. This person is morally corrupted, so he loves evil and evil speech and hates good and true speech.

52:5–7. *The downfall of the wicked*

God will eventually judge this wicked person as he deserves. He will be ruined forever, his home (*tent*) destroyed, and he will die (*he will uproot you from the land of the living*). The righteous, who were the brunt of his oppression, will witness his destruction and mock him because he tried to protect himself by his own strength, unlike the righteous, who put themselves under God's protection. The righteous will respond with *fear*, but not the type of fear that makes one run away; after all, they know that they will not be subject to the punishment dished out to the wicked person. They will respond with a proper and healthy fear of the Lord (most famously, Prov. 1:7), as they witness God dealing with this powerful, evil person.

52:8–9. *Like an olive tree*

While the wicked will be destroyed, the righteous will flourish. As the mighty hero (v. 1) represents the former, so the psalmist represents the latter. The righteous are those who trust in God's *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *hesed*). God has promised to protect the righteous, and the psalmist relies on that promise. As a result, he likens himself to an *olive tree*. An olive tree is not only a symbol of life⁸³ (as is the tree of Pss 1; 92:12–13; Jer. 11:16), but also of fertility, as it produces olives, a staple of Israelite agriculture. God's protection gives the psalmist hope and leads him to worship God continually.

Meaning

Psalm 52 reminds ancient and modern readers that God is the only true source of protection and prosperity. While on the surface it looks as if the wicked person will win, the truth is that God will bless the righteous.

In terms of reading the psalm from a New Testament perspective, Hossfeld and Zenger make a connection with Mark 2:23–28, where Jesus' disciples pick grain, and in their defence Jesus cites the historical precedent of David taking bread from the priests at Nob, which is the occasion cited in the historical title of Psalm 52 (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 34). While this is an interesting observation, it is hardly a substantial connection. I find it more productive to read the psalm as a prayer of Jesus, who is attacked by wicked spiritual and human agents, but nevertheless puts his hope in God, and although he suffers death is ultimately victorious (*like an olive tree flourishing in the house of God*).

Psalm 53. ‘There is no God’

Context

Psalm 53 is a near twin to Psalm 14. Both are laments that utilize wisdom concepts and vocabulary. Except for the title, which adds some technical elements (see Introduction), there are only two major differences between the two psalms. The first is that Psalm 53 uses the generic *God* (’ēlōhîm), rather than ‘LORD’ (Yahweh), which is in keeping with the practice of the second book of the Psalter. The second difference is found in verse 5 and will be described below in the *Comment* section.

Comment

53:1–3. See commentary on 14:1–3.

53:4–5. Verses 4–5a are similar to 14:4–5, the substantial difference between the two psalms being limited to verse 5b. While Psalm 14:5b–6 highlights God’s protective presence with his people over against the evildoers, Psalm 53:5b describes the judgment that will come on the wicked. They are afraid of shadows (*where there was nothing to dread*). Rather than achieving success, the wicked who try to oppress the righteous will themselves be defeated. They wanted to attack God’s people, but God will scatter their bones and render them ineffectual.

53:6. See commentary on 14:7.

Meaning

See Psalm 14.

Psalm 54. Arrogant foes are attacking me

Context

The psalmist laments the attacks by his proud enemies and calls on God to save and vindicate him. The ending strikes a note of confidence and promises a freewill offering and praise to the God who saves him. The historical title attributes the psalm to David at the time when he was betrayed by Ziphites, who were from Judah as he himself was (1 Sam. 23:19; 26:1).

For the remainder of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

54:1–3. *Save me from my foes*

The psalmist appeals to God to pay attention to his prayer, requesting rescue and vindication. He appeals to God because of his reputation (*name*) and power (*might*). Reading this in the light of the historical title, David seeks rescue from, and vindication against, Saul and the Ziphites (see *Context*), but the psalm itself is historically non-specific, so it can be used by others in similar straits. The call to *vindicate* (from *dîn*) comes from the legal realm, although it does not demand that the psalm has a formal court setting. The speaker wants to be shown to be right in the light of false accusations. David was certainly falsely suspected of betrayal by Saul, but the Ziphites did betray David.

Verse 3 gives voice to his complaint. Godless people are attacking him. They are arrogant and ruthless. Again, in the light of the historical title, the reference could be to both Saul and the Ziphites.

54:4–5. *God is my help*

In contrast to the godless attackers, the psalmist puts his trust in God. He affirms his belief that God is his helper and sustainer. The word *help* (*‘ezer*) in a military context can mean ‘ally’. The psalmist feels strongly that God is on his side in this battle. He then requests that the evil intended for him by his enemies be turned back on themselves. The book of Proverbs speaks of evil people falling into their own traps (Prov. 1:18–19), as do other psalms (9:15; 35:7–8). He wants God to demonstrate his *faithfulness* by protecting him and destroying his enemies (see Introduction: Imprecations, pp. 51–52).

54:6–7. *I will praise you*

The psalm ends with what is either a confident statement of ultimate victory or perhaps even an acknowledgment of victory over the foe. Whichever the case, the psalmist worships God with a freewill offering. The *freewill offering* was simply a non-compulsory gift to God, and thus demonstrates the psalmist's overwhelming gratitude (Lev. 7:16; cf. Exod. 35:29; 2 Chr. 31:14).

Meaning

This brief psalm reminds the person who suffers the attacks of others that God is the place to turn for help. He is our Protector and the One who vindicates us from false accusations.

As a call for vindication when faced by arrogant attackers, this psalm fits the life of Jesus. He too, like David, was the object of false accusations and plots to harm him. His vindication came when God raised him from the dead, so that he was 'vindicated by the Spirit' (1 Tim. 3:16).

Psalm 55. Cast your cares on the Lord

Context

The poet turns to God in the midst of an attack by those who want to harm him. Most galling is the participation of a close friend whose actions belie his words, as he breaks an agreement (*covenant*) with the psalmist. This individual lament comes from a person who is deeply afraid, but who ultimately trusts in God to protect him and judge his enemies.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment 55:1–3. Listen, O God

55:1–3. Listen, O God

The psalmist appeals to God to hear his prayer and to answer his request. He is deeply troubled because his enemies threaten to harm him.

55:4–8. Fear and trembling

The enemies have instilled great fear in the psalmist. He is afraid that he will die at their hands, and so he wants to flee and get away from the trouble. He wishes he were like a *dove* that could simply fly away and find a place of safety (see Ps. 11:1), a place in the desolate wilderness (*the desert*), far from those who threaten him, represented by *tempest and storm*.

55:9–11. Violence in the city

Evil people have troubled the city, which is not named, but perhaps we are to understand that it is Jerusalem. Gangs (*destructive forces*) have taken over the city, and thus there is the threat of violence all day and night. The psalmist calls on God to help. Using language that is reminiscent of the Tower of Babel story where God scatters those who attempt to build a tower and a city (Gen. 11:1–9), the psalmist calls on God to trouble the communication of these wicked people (*Lord, confuse the wicked, confound their words*).

55:12–15. Betrayed by a close friend

Most bitter of all is betrayal by a *close friend*, and the psalmist now addresses the traitor (*but it is you*). An enemy is one thing, but a close friend who becomes

an enemy is quite another. In this case, it was a fellow worshipper with whom he had shared fellowship at the sanctuary (*the house of God*). This betrayal is hard to endure and impossible to hide from. He then addresses the whole lot of his enemies, wishing them to die. They are evil and will be better off in *the realm of the dead*. Indeed, he wants them to go to the realm of the dead while they are still alive, perhaps reminiscent of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16:30–31; VanGemeren 2008: 453).

55:16–19. Enthroned from of old

In the face of hostility, the psalmist expresses his deep confidence in God, who answers his continual (*evening, morning and noon*) calls for help. God is King from all ages past (*enthroned from of old*; Ps. 93:2) and he does not change. He saves his people and punishes those who do not have the proper attitude towards him (*fear*, indicating that a person knows God is the centre of the cosmos).

55:20–23. I trust in you

The enemy (the implied subject) talks one way and acts in another. He is a traitor (vv. 12–14), who speaks as if he were a friend (smoothly and soothingly), while planning betrayal. In short, he is a hypocrite. Most notably, he *violates his covenant* as he attacks his friend. A covenant between humans is like a treaty. Thus, his betrayal of the psalmist breaks not just a social bond, which is bad enough, but also a legal one.

In response, the poet advises his hearers to take their worries and give them to God. After all, God will protect the righteous and punish the wicked. Thus, the psalmist can place his trust in God.

Meaning

The psalmist is under attack by violent enemies, but most troubling is the betrayal of a close friend and confidant. He is wracked with fear and wishes he could get away and hide, but he knows he cannot. He calls on God to rescue him and judge his adversaries. Although he is afraid, he puts his trust in God.

The psalm thus provides inspiration for the prayers of later worshippers who find themselves beset by enemies and, in particular, when betrayed by a close companion. Thinking of this as a prayer of Jesus, one remembers that his betrayer, Judas, was one of his inner circle. Jesus trusted God, in spite of the acts of the traitor Judas and those enemies who arrested, tried and crucified him.

Hossfeld points out that verse 22a (*Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you*) is cited in 1 Peter 5:7. Peter ‘makes use of the aphoristic character

of the verse and causes this discernible Scripture quotation to function as a word of consolation in the face of the community's troubles' (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 58).

Psalm 56. What can mere mortals do to me?

Context

Psalm 56 is an individual lament that again displays the psalmist's trust in God in the midst of assault. This sense of trust is emphasized by a refrain found in verse 4 and repeated in verses 10–11. The historical title situates the composition in the aftermath of David's time in the Philistine city of Gath (see also the title of Ps. 34). Of the two accounts that we have of David in Gath (1 Sam. 21:10–15; 27:1 – 28:2), the former is the most likely occasion. While the passage does not explicitly say he was seized in Gath, it may be implied by the charges levelled at him by the leaders of the Philistines, who thought he might be a spy of some sort.

For the rest of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment 56:1–2. Be merciful

56:1–2. Be merciful

As is typical in a lament, the psalmist begins by invoking God and appealing to him for help. He then immediately gives the reason for his complaint: the hot pursuit of his enemies. At least, that is how the NIV understands it. The verb translated *are in hot pursuit* (š'p) can either be 'to pant after' or 'to trample', and the NIV takes the first meaning. The NLT's 'people are hounding me' picks up on both potential meanings (see also Goldingay 2007: 184). *Pride* motivates their attack against the psalmist.

56:3–4. What can mere mortals do to me?

In spite of his fear, the poet puts his trust in God, and that leads him from fear to confidence. While his enemies might be dangerous, he knows that they are no match for God, and he expresses this belief by the rhetorical question: *What can mere mortals do to me?* (see v. 11).

56:5–7. The complaint

The psalmist complains that his enemies misrepresent him in order to ruin him. They are intentionally plotting his downfall. Their ultimate goal is to take his life. In return, the psalmist calls down imprecations on their heads (see

Introduction: Imprecations, pp. 51–52). In keeping with the title (see *Context*), the enemies are not just individuals, but *nations*, or ‘peoples’ (*‘ammîm*).

56:8–9. *Record my misery*

The psalmist rhetorically asks if God is aware of his *misery*, caused by his enemies. He knows that they are contained in God’s *record*. The NIV goes astray by translating verse 8b as *list my tears on your scroll*. The Hebrew word, as recognized by virtually every other modern translation, is not *scroll*, but ‘jar’.⁸⁴ The picture is of God capturing the psalmist’s tears in a jar and that they serve as testimony against the enemy.

56:10–11. *What can man do to me?*

The wording of these verses is very close to verses 3–4, serving as a refrain in the psalm. Here the psalmist makes clear again that he puts his trust in God when he is afraid. With a slight variation (*man* [‘*ādām*] for *mere mortals* [*bāśār*; lit. ‘flesh’]), the psalmist rhetorically asks, *What can man do to me?*

56:12–13. *Vows*

Similar to the ending of Psalm 54, this psalm concludes with the psalmist’s intention of fulfilling his vows to God, which implies that he promised them in return for God hearing his prayers and thwarting his enemies’ attempts to kill him. A vow was a promise given to God in return for answered prayer (Lev. 7:16; 22:23; Deut. 12:6–7) and is frequently mentioned in the psalms (13:6; 22:25; 27:6; 35:18; 54:6; 56:12–13; 61:5; 65:1; 69:30–31; 116:1–4; 132:2). These include giving *thank-offerings* to God.

Meaning

The psalmist puts his trust in God, in spite of the vicious attacks by his enemies. The psalm thus helps later readers transform their fear into confidence, as the psalmist proclaims that no person can hurt us since God is our Protector. It also informs us that God is aware of our sorrows and troubles (vv. 8–9).

The psalmist’s rhetorical question: *What can mere mortals do to me?* anticipates Paul’s triumphant ‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’ (Rom. 8:31). He goes on to say, ‘...we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that

is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:37–39).⁸⁵ In Jesus, we learn that not even death can defeat us.

Psalm 57. Let your glory be over all the earth

Context

From the very first line, we recognize this psalm as an individual lament by a person who is being attacked by vicious enemies. The psalm moves from cry for help and invocation and complaint (vv. 1–6) to confidence and praise (vv. 7–11; see also vv. 2b–3). The historical title identifies David as the original composer, and the moment that inspired him as the time he fled from Saul and found refuge in a cave (see 1 Sam. 22:1).^[86] See the Introduction for a general discussion of these historical titles. Certainly, the psalm well represents David's vulnerability, but also his dependence on God during the time when Saul sought to kill him. The refrain (vv. 5, 11) gives the poem a sense of cohesion and closure. Verses 7–11 are repeated in Psalm 108:1–5.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment 57:1. In the shadow of your wings

57:1. In the shadow of your wings

The psalmist prays to God to protect him in the midst of an unspecified *disaster*. In later verses (vv. 3, 4, 6), we will learn that he is being attacked by powerful and dangerous enemies who want to destroy him. By not being more specific, the composer allows later readers to apply this prayer to their own unique circumstances. The psalmist expresses his intention to trust God by evoking the refuge provided by a bird's *wings* (see also Pss 17:8; 36:7; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). To most, this suggests the image of a bird shielding its young with its *wings*,^[87] or perhaps driving potential threats away from its young with the rapid beating of its wings. However, it is also possible that there is a polemical function to this image and that the comparison is with winged deities of the Ancient Near East. Perhaps both are brought to mind, since the winged deities themselves are bird-like.^[88]

57:2–3. God saves me

After praying to God, the psalmist now speaks to the congregation, acknowledging his appeal to God, as well as expressing confidence that God will indeed save him from his persecutors. The hope that God will send help from

heaven reminds the reader of the dramatic rescue in Psalm 18:3–15. His confidence lies in God's *love* (covenant loyalty; *hesed*) and *faithfulness*. God will not let him down.

57:4. *Vicious enemies*

The psalmist likens his enemies to dangerous lions that desire to destroy him (Pss 7:2; 10:9; 17:12; 22:13, 21; 35:17; 57:4). He is in their midst, like Daniel who was literally in the lions' den (Dan. 6). Their weapons are their teeth and their tongue. The metaphor could indicate a literal battle or a verbal conflict. Perhaps the ambiguity allows for use in either circumstance.

57:5. *Be exalted*

In this first iteration of the refrain (see also v. 11), we see that the psalmist is most concerned about God's reputation in the world. He wants God to be exalted by all and above all.

57:6. *Their downfall*

In verse 4, he described his enemies as if they were lions; here he uses another well-known metaphor, describing them as hunters who use a *net* (perhaps suggesting a fowler; see Prov. 1:17) and a *pit* to capture their prey. For the idea that the enemy will fall into the traps that they themselves set, see commentary at 9:15–16.

57:7–10. *Be steadfast*

The psalmist's lament now turns to a statement of confidence and praise. In spite of the danger, the psalmist remains calm (*My heart, O God, is steadfast*). He can praise God in the midst of his suffering because he knows that his God can rescue him. Thus, he will praise God with music. Indeed, he will start so early in the day that the dawning sun will find him worshipping God (*I will awaken the dawn*). He won't just praise God privately, but also publicly. After all, his God is not a local, regional God; he is the God of the whole universe. His *love* and *faithfulness* (see v. 3) permeate everything.

57:11. *Be exalted*

The psalm reaches closure by the repetition of the refrain found in verse 5.

Meaning

Psalm 57 is a psalm of David, God's anointed, in the midst of vicious attack by enemies who want to kill him. He calls on God for protection, having confidence that God will hear his prayer. As a result, he praises God publicly and seeks God's exaltation throughout the universe. The prayer is a model for Christians who suffer at the hands of others. This ancient prayer gives us words to express our joy in the midst of our suffering.

If one reads Psalm 57 as the words of Jesus, David's descendant and the anointed (Messiah) of the Lord, we see that it reflects his suffering at the hands of those who wanted to destroy him. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he called on God to remove his suffering, but he eventually went to the cross. However, the victory was not ultimately his enemies'. His resurrection led to God's exaltation 'above the heavens' and the spread of his glory 'over all the earth' (vv. 5, 11).

Psalm 58. The injustice of rulers

Context

There is no doubt that the psalmist faces a life-threatening problem. Unjust rulers wreak havoc. What is unclear is whether this lament is that of an individual speaking on his own behalf or for the community. The latter seems most likely. Psalm 58 is sometimes also classified as a prophetic psalm, in that it anticipates the demise of these oppressive rulers.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

58:1–5. *The poison of evil rulers*

The psalmist addresses evil rulers who judge in a way that leads to injustice rather than justice, violence rather than peace. God judges *with equity* (Ps. 98:9), and rulers should reflect their divine King. The word for *rulers* may suggest spiritual beings (angels; especially if we accept a slight emendation [*'elîm* for *'ēlem*], the latter makes no sense in the context) or possibly human rulers. Interestingly, Psalm 82 chastises the spiritual powers for not exercising their authority justly. The Teacher bemoans the fact that justice cannot be found among human rulers (Eccl. 3:15–16).

The injustice of human rulers leads the psalmist to inveigh against wicked people in general. He says that they were born that way. They are as dangerous and deadly as a *cobra* who cannot be charmed.

58:6–8. *Destroy them*

The psalmist unleashes a flurry of imprecations against his enemies (see Introduction: Imprecations, pp. 51–52). Verse 6 pointedly asks God to smash them in the mouth. They are *lions*, dangerous predators, who need to be defanged. Next, he likens them to *water that flows away* into nothingness. They shoot *arrows* at the psalmist (and his people), so he asks God to cause their arrows to land short and thus miss their target. He wants them to be like a *slug* that melts away as it moves. This picture probably understands the slime that a slug leaves behind as it moves to be the slug itself melting away. And then finally, he wants his enemies to be like a *stillborn child*, dead to the world, as if

they had never existed.

58:9–11. The wicked will disappear

As the NIV footnote indicates, the Hebrew of verse 9 is uncertain, and so a number of different translations are suggested. The common point of all the modern versions, and therefore the clear teaching of the verse, is the claim that the wicked will be removed quickly. The NIV says that their removal will be quicker than a pot can feel the heat of a fire, whether that fire is fuelled by green thorns or dry, although the latter would be quicker.

The final two verses remark on the joy that comes to the righteous when they see judgment brought on the wicked who oppress them. The psalmist is graphic when he speaks of the joy of the righteous as they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked. Most modern readers find this language off-putting, but most modern readers have not suffered the violence and cruelty of wicked people as the psalmist apparently had. And to the psalmist, the death of the wicked is just and an indication that there is a God of justice.

Meaning

Psalm 58 is addressed to unjust rulers. They may be spiritual powers, human rulers, or both. In any case, they are dangerous and deadly. The psalmist asks God to destroy them, and he ends the psalm with a confident belief that they will not last long. The righteous will then be reassured that there is a God of justice.

Christians are often disturbed when they read verse 10 (*The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked*). Above, we placed this sentiment in the context of the extreme suffering inflicted by the wicked on the righteous. That said, God's people today should not rejoice in the bloody death of the wicked. While Jesus never disowned the Old Testament with its warfare and imprecations, he intensified the warfare on evil to attack the spiritual powers rather than flesh-and-blood enemies. He presented a pattern of turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies, and his disciples should follow his lead here. However, in the final judgment, Jesus himself is said to wear a 'robe dipped in blood' (Rev. 19:13).

Psalm 59. Snarling like dogs

Context

The opening of the psalm reads like a typical lament of an individual under attack by enemies who want to harm him. Indeed, the historical title attributes the psalm to David, when Saul sent people to kill him. In terms of David's life, 1 Samuel 19:11–18 fits closest to the situation envisioned by the psalm. That said, the poem also sends signals that the psalmist is at odds not just with an individual, but with the nations (vv. 5, 8, 13), which would not conform well with David's life in his pre-monarchical period (although it is possible that the editors of the Psalms who composed the titles had more traditions about David than we have now). Perhaps the psalm was written in at least two different stages. Or, according to Tate, perhaps the psalmist (David?) was dealing with both international and internal attacks (Tate, 1991).

For the rest of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

59:1–2. *Deliver me*

The psalmist appeals to God for rescue and protection from those who attack him with the intent of killing him. God's protection is likened to being in a *fortress*, a common metaphor in the book (used here in verbal form; see vv. 9, 16–17; for noun, see Pss 9:9; 62:2, 6).

59:3–5. *Arise to help me*

The psalmist calls on God to witness the atrocities brought on him. He has done nothing wrong. The historical title situates the composition of the psalm at the beginning of Saul's persecution of David, and that occasion certainly illustrates a time when David did not deserve the attacks on his reputation and life. The poet is helpless and calls on God to *arise*. Elsewhere, such a call is connected to warfare and specifically to calls on God as Warrior to come to the psalmist's aid (see citations at Ps. 7:6–9). He calls God by his battle name (*LORD God Almighty*) and asks God to punish the *nations* and *traitors*.

59:6–8. *Snarling like dogs*

The enemies are *like dogs* (see also vv. 14–15). In ancient Israel, dogs were not pets, but vicious and dangerous scavengers. Like dogs, the enemies *prowl* around the city. Their appearance at *evening* makes them particularly scary, since they are hard to see. The threat from the enemy starts with their words. They speak as if no-one can hear them, which is a ridiculous thought since God hears and knows all things. Thus, God laughs at them for their folly and ignorance (see Ps. 2:4).

59:9–13. Do not kill them

The psalmist can count on God's help and protection. God will not let the enemy be victorious. In the end, he will *gloat* over the downfall of his enemies who are trying to pull him down by *slander*, *curses* and *lies*.

Interestingly, he asks God to refrain from killing his enemies, but not out of a sense of mercy for them. He is afraid that if they die, then others will forget. As Goldingay puts it, these verses begin 'with the eyebrow-raising plea for the attackers to be treated a little like the Canaanites, not annihilated but kept alive for the spiritual benefit of Israel (cf. Judg. 2:20–23; also Exod. 9:16)' (Goldingay 2007: 219). In other words, God wants to make an object lesson of them by hurting them slowly. Eventually, he wants them to be gone, but not right away. The psalmist believes that in this way God will be shown to rule, rather than those who seem to have all the power at present.

59:14–17. Snarling like dogs

In spite of his confidence, the psalmist finds himself thinking again (see vv. 6–8) of the dog-like nature of his enemies. They *prowl* the city streets looking for food. In this case, the psalmist himself is the food that the dogs want to eat. If they do not get the food they want, they howl in exasperation.

This thought leads the psalmist to praise God, because he is convinced that God will not allow him to be eaten by these rabid dogs. He is the psalmist's *fortress*, picking up an idea begun in the opening verses, as well as in verse 9.

Meaning

Psalm 59 is a prayer for those who are being attacked by enemies, whether individual enemies or corporate or both. They want blood, but use their tongues to achieve their ends. God is a *fortress*, and the enemy is like snarling dogs. The psalmist calls on God to deal with his foes, but slowly, in order to serve as a warning to others and an encouragement to his people.

The New Testament speaks of the enemies of the gospel as dogs, who are

‘mutilators of the flesh’ (Phil. 3:2). According to Revelation, the opponents of the righteous are ‘the dogs, those who practise magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practises falsehood’ (22:15).

Psalm 60. With God we will gain the victory

Context

Psalm 60 is a community lament after a military defeat. The psalmist, whom the title identifies as David, turns to God to chide him for abandoning his people and to call on him to save them from their enemy. The psalm itself identifies the enemy as Edom (vv. 9–12), although the title identifies Joab and not David as the war leader who killed 12,000 Edomites at the Valley of Salt. The title associates David with battles against Aram Naharaim (see 2 Sam. 10:16–19) and Aram Zobah (2 Sam. 8:3–6; 10:6–15). While 2 Samuel 8:13 attributes to David a victory over Edomites in the Valley of Salt (killing 18,000 of them), 1 Kings 11:15–16 does say that Joab ‘destroyed all the men in Edom’. To complicate matters further, 1 Chronicles 18:12 attributes the victory to Abishai. That said, all three (David, Joab and Abishai) are commanders in the army and could be credited with the victory. For the other elements of the title, see the Introduction.

See Psalm 108:6–13 for the reuse of verses 5–12 in another context.

Comment

60:1–4. *You have rejected us, now restore us*

The psalmist, speaking on behalf of Israel, does not mince his words as he accuses God of abandoning and attacking them. With the same breath, he also calls on God to *restore* them (v. 1; see also the appeal that God *mend* the land in v. 2).

God’s anger has led him to tear the land apart. The latter part of the psalm will clarify that the land’s problems are caused by attacking enemies, but the psalmist understands that these enemies can only touch them with divine permission or even encouragement. The reference to the *wine that makes us stagger* is an allusion to the cup of God’s wrath. God, in his judgment, forces them to drink wine that disorients those who consume it; they will ultimately collapse, indicating their defeat. The cup of God’s wrath is a common theme in the prophets (Isa. 19:14; 51:17; Jer. 25:15–38; Nah. 1:10; 3:11; see also Ps. 75:8).

Verse 4, though, suggests that there is hope for those who fear God. The raising of the war *banner* suggests that God will fight for them against their attackers.

60:5–8. God's triumph

The first stanza describes the dire predicament of the people of God. Now, the psalmist appeals to God to rescue them (*those you love*). In doing so, he expands upon his call to God to restore them (v. 1) and to mend the land (v. 2).

Elsewhere, God is depicted as using *his right hand*, his hand of power, to destroy the enemy (Exod. 15:6, 12; Pss 20:6; 21:8). After calling on God to save them, the psalmist then quotes what looks to be an earlier oracle. God spoke from his *sanctuary*. When the ark of the covenant, which was placed in the Most Holy Place of the sanctuary, was built, God informs Moses: ‘...above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites’ (Exod. 25:22).

Thus, in regard to an earlier conflict that we cannot otherwise identify, God uses the language of victory and distribution (*parcel out; measure off*) concerning *Shechem*, an important northern city in Ephraim situated between Mounts Ebal and Gerizim and the *Valley of Sukkoth* (‘Shelters’), a town on the eastern side of the Jordan near the wadi Jabbok, where Jacob put up shelters for his livestock (Gen. 33:17), and which was later given to the tribe of Gad (Josh. 13:27). It was the place punished by Gideon for not giving them support during his battle with the Midianites (Judg. 8:5–9, 13–17).

In verse 7, God names the region known as *Gilead* and the tribe of *Manasseh* as his possession, perhaps because, along with the tribes of *Judah* and *Ephraim*, they were involved in this earlier conflict. Ephraim is called God's *helmet*, a symbol of military prowess, as is the *sceptre*, an ornamental mace, here associated with the tribe of Judah. The sceptre is also a symbol of royal rule and associated with the emergence of kingship in Judah, anticipated in Jacob's blessing on Judah (Gen. 49:10) and coming to realization with David and his descendants.

While verse 7 describes those on God's side, verse 8 depicts those who are the object of God's derision and attack. *Moab* and *Edom* are two nations on the other side of the Jordan who were often in conflict with Israel. Philistia was an internal threat, particularly from the southern Mediterranean coast until the time of David. Moab is described as God's *washbasin*. On Edom, God tosses his *sandal*, an insulting gesture in the Near East down to the present day (Ruth 4:7 is perhaps relevant here). Over Philistia, God *shouts in triumph*.

60:9–12. Give us aid, God!

The citation of the earlier oracle in verses 6–8 reminds God how he had come in the past to save them when they were in distress. Verses 9–12 now speak of the

present crisis that is associated with Edom, a perennial enemy (Num. 20:14–21; 2 Sam. 8:14; Ps. 137:7–9; Jer. 49:7–22; Lam. 4:22; Ezek. 35:15; Obad. 12–14), even mentioned in the previous oracle (v. 8). *Edom* is located south of Moab in the area to the south-east of the Dead Sea. It is a region of rugged mountains and wadis, making it a hard area to attack. The title invites us to read the psalm as the prayer of David, who now asks God to bring him to victory against Edom. Present circumstances make it seem as if God has abandoned them, but now he calls on God the Warrior to make his presence known to them. If God grants this, there is no question but that they will be victorious.

Meaning

Most psalms are historically non-specific in order to be relevant to later, similar, though not identical, situations (see Introduction: Composition, collection, organization, use, pp. 31–38). As noted in the *Context*, Psalm 60 appears to be more precisely embedded in a particular historical event, namely a military threat from the Edomites. We cannot date this precise threat from the content of the psalm, since the Edomites were a perennial problem for Israel, but it does raise the question as to whether this psalm, unlike most of the rest of the psalms, has a broader relevance for later worshippers. Verse 12 addresses that question when it states with confidence, *With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies*.

Thus, the psalm could be prayed by later Israel, even if the enemy they faced were not the Edomites. Christians do not fight flesh-and-blood enemies, but rather spiritual foes (Eph. 6:1–20), and this psalm can serve as a model prayer in the face of such conflict.

Psalm 61. The rock that is higher than I

Context

The psalm laments separation from home, which must be in Jerusalem since the psalmist yearns for God's *tent*. Why he is so far away is unknown, and the idea that this is a psalm of a later exile is not the only possibility, particularly when a prayer for the king is included. Indeed, the psalm reads well as an original composition by David, who prays not only for himself, but also for the continuing institution of kingship. The psalm is filled with metaphors of protection, most memorably the reference to God as a high rock.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

61:1–3. *From the ends of the earth*

This individual lament begins, as so many do, with an invocation and a call to God for help (v. 1). He wants God to hear his *prayer*, which includes acting on it. He is not at home, not near Jerusalem and the sanctuary, but he prays *from the ends of the earth*. His situation makes him depressed and anxious (*my heart grows faint*; Ps. 143:4). He recognizes God as his Protector (*refuge/strong tower*) against his enemies. And he wants that protection now, as he asks God to take him to *the rock that is higher than I*. The rock is God and another metaphor for protection (18:2). Just as God is more powerful than he is (by far), so this protective rock is higher than he is and elevates him above the turmoil.

61:4–5. *In your tent forever*

He is far from home (v. 2), far from the sanctuary, and he yearns to be in God's *tent*. God's tent might be a reference to the tabernacle, a tent representing God's presence on earth. Such a reference would be appropriate for the time of David, who is named in the title. In any case, the psalmist clearly desires to be near the place where God makes his special presence known to humanity. There he can find protection, the kind of protection offered by a bird to its chicks (*the shelter of your wings*; for more on this metaphor, see commentary on Ps. 91:4; also 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 63:7).

The psalmist has made vows to God, promises contingent on God answering

his prayers. The *heritage* of those who fear God's name is, among other things, the promise of protection. To fear God's name is to recognize that God is the centre of the universe, having great power and thus worthy of reference.

61:6–8. A prayer for the king

The psalmist now prays for the king. He asks God to give him long life and reign, and that God's covenant *love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) and *faithfulness* will protect him. The relationship between the king and the psalmist is unclear. The latter seems to be talking about the king as another person, after speaking in the first person up to this point. On the other hand, the title suggests that when the psalmist, who is King David, speaks of himself as king, he speaks of the office rather than personally.

The psalmist ends the prayer by affirming his intention to fulfil his vows, and to praise God as God answers his prayers.

Meaning

The psalmist expresses his anguish at being separated from the presence of God as he prays to him from the ends of the earth. He is also beset by enemies, although he calls on God to protect him. He prays not just for himself as an individual, but also for the king (which may also be the psalmist).

This psalm was composed during the Old Testament period, when God made his special presence known in a particular place (the sanctuary). Today, thanks to Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit, we can meet with God even at the 'ends of the earth'. That said, we can still feel separated from God, especially when our enemies attack us. Psalm 61, then, is an appropriate prayer for us.

Today, if we do not have a king to pray for, we can pray for our political leaders. But more to the point of the psalm's request that the king be *enthroned in God's presence for ever* is the truth that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), the ultimate fulfilment of the Davidic covenant that David would have a descendant on the throne forever (2 Sam. 7:11–16).

Psalm 62. My soul finds rest in God

Context

In this prayer, the psalmist turns to God in the midst of a crisis (and an assault by hypocritical liars) and articulates a confident trust in God's protection. The psalm is thus similar in tone to a psalm of confidence, but the recognition of trouble is stronger in this poem than in many other such psalms. The psalmist alternately addresses himself, the congregation, God and the enemy. The title is similar to that of Psalm 39 (see also Introduction: Titles, pp. 23–31).

Comment

62:1–2. *My rock and my salvation*

Rather than beginning with complaint, the composer asserts his utter confidence in God's ability to protect him. While circumstances conspire to upset his life and fill him with anxiety (see vv. 3–4), he relaxes in his relationship with God. He knows that the solution to his troubles comes from God who is his *salvation*. Through his use of metaphors of protection (*rock* and *fortress* [18:2], but there *mišgāb* is translated 'stronghold'), he reveals his belief that God will not let those who assault him overwhelm him.

62:3–4. *About to fall*

The psalmist begins his complaint by asking, *How long?* – a question found in a number of prayers (4:2; 6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84). The phrase indicates that the sufferer has been long in his pain and sees no terminus in sight, but it also expresses his belief that enough is enough.

While the Hebrew is better rendered: 'How long will you assault a person?', the NIV is right that the psalmist is speaking indirectly of himself. He is the one being attacked by those who perceive his weakness (communicated by the metaphors *leaning wall*, *tottering fence*). They are hypocrites who traffic in deception, as they seek to undermine the psalmist's remaining strength.

62:5–8. *My rock and my salvation*

In the light of this assault, the composer urges himself to *find rest* in God. As in

verse 1, he acknowledges that God is his buffer against his enemies, although here he speaks of God being the source of his *hope* rather than his salvation. He repeats and expands upon the thoughts in the first stanza. God is his protection, communicated again by the metaphors of *rock* and *fortress*, with the added metaphor of *refuge*. For the first time, the psalmist addresses the congregation by urging them to join him in his trust in God's ability to protect them (v. 8).

62:9–10. Humans are nothing

God is their protection, and human beings are no threat. *Highborn* and *lowborn* ^[89] are used as a merism (citing the poles to mean everything in between) indicating all humanity. The word *breath* (*hebel*) is well known throughout the book of Ecclesiastes and is typically translated 'meaningless', although elsewhere it could also have the temporal meaning 'transient'. The highborn are also a *lie*, because they look substantial but really are not.

With this observation, the composer again turns to the congregation to urge them not to put their trust in wealth rather than in God, particularly wealth amassed illegitimately (by extortion or theft). The book of Proverbs is filled with warnings about ill-gotten gains or putting trust in wealth (Prov. 11:4). After all, such wealth does not last (Prov. 11:18).

62:11–12. God has spoken

The psalmist concludes by reporting two truths about God.^[90] These truths about God are spoken by God himself. God is powerful and he is also characterized by *unfailing love* (or loyal love; *hesed*). Thus, he will not let his servant the psalmist suffer at the hands of those who assault him. Second, God will see that everyone receives their proper desert, with the implication that the psalmist will be rescued and his enemies will be punished (see also Prov. 24:12).

Meaning

The psalmist is vulnerable to the attacks of those who want to undermine him. He is like a leaning wall or a tottering fence. He knows better than to turn to other people for help. They are insubstantial and can provide no aid. It is also futile to trust in wealth, particularly ill-gotten gain. His only hope is God, but God is a sure hope. He will protect and rescue the psalmist from his trouble.

After all, God is powerful, and he shows great fidelity to his people. Thus, he will make sure that those who assault the righteous will receive their just deserts (v. 12). Paul quotes this psalm's final verse in Romans 2:6, where he speaks about God's righteous judgment, encouraging his hearers to pursue God rather

than their own stubborn and unrepentant heart. In his second letter to Timothy (4:14), Paul applies this principle (and perhaps this verse) to Alexander the metalworker who ‘did me a great deal of harm’.

Hossfeld and Zenger rightly see our psalm’s teaching behind Jesus’ parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21) who puts his trust in money. He works hard to store up wealth, but it does not protect him from death. The parable and the psalm both warn that ‘this is how it will be for whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God’ (Luke 12:21; Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 117–118).

Psalm 63. I thirst for you

Context

The psalmist opens by confessing his desperate need for God's presence. As in the opening of Psalm 42, he compares his desire for God to the thirst of someone in a waterless land. This psalm is the lament of an individual and expresses a fundamental trust in God's ultimate victory against murderous foes. The title identifies the composer as David, and the original setting is a reflection on his time in the wilderness (making the thirst metaphor especially appropriate). No further specific historical event is offered, and it is unclear whether the title points to the time when David was in the wilderness fleeing from Saul (1 Sam. 21 – 23), or from Absalom (2 Sam. 15:13–30), although both provide a vivid picture of a circumstance that could have inspired the writing of the poem.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

63:1. A thirst for God

The psalmist desires God's presence, which at present he does not experience. He seeks God, whose absence is likened to an absence of water. He is like a thirsty person in a land with no water. As we saw at the beginning of Psalm 42, this image indicates the unhappy plight of the psalmist and his desperate need in the midst of crisis.

63:2–5. Past satisfaction

While at present God seems absent, the psalmist has had a vital and rich experience of his presence in the past. He has been to the holy place, the *sanctuary*, where God makes his presence known to his people on earth. He has been overwhelmed by God's *power* and *glory*. He has felt God's *love* (or loyalty; *hesed*), which is the most important thing to him; it is *better than life*. He would rather die than live without God's love. Thus, he worships God. Only God can satisfy him. God's presence satisfies him more than the *richest* food satisfies his hunger.

63:6–8. In the shadow of your wings

The psalmist remembers God and his protection at night in his *bed*. Night is the time when we are most vulnerable, both physically and emotionally. In the quiet of night our fears come on us, but the psalmist finds solace in God. God is his help in the midst of his troubles, and cares for him like a mother bird protects and shelters her young (see comment at Ps. 91:3–8). God’s *right hand* is his hand of power with which he vanquishes his foes (see comment at Ps. 98:1–3).

63:9–12. *My enemy will be vanquished*

Although the psalmist is under duress from enemies who want to kill him, he ends on a confident note. His enemies will not destroy him, but they themselves will meet a violent end. They will die in battle (*given over to the sword*), and their lifeless bodies will be consumed by *jackals*. As a result, the king (according to the title, David) will rejoice in God, while his lying enemies will be silenced by death.

Meaning

The psalmist seeks God’s help in the face of murderous foes. He desires God’s palpable presence in the crisis and remembers the clear experience of his power and glory in the sanctuary (v. 2). He is willing to die for God’s love which is *better than life* (v. 3), although he is also confident in God’s ultimate victory on his behalf. He commits himself to worship.

As Wilson insightfully points out, Jesus expressed the psalmist’s passion that God’s love is better than life as he faced a death on the cross that he did not want to face. And even though he did die, God had victory over his foes (ultimately the spiritual powers and authorities) through the resurrection (Wilson 2002: 896).

Moreover, in reading the opening of Psalm 63 in which the psalmist likens his desire for God to thirst, the Christian reader thinks naturally of Jesus’ words: ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them’ (John 7:37–38).

Psalm 64. Conspiracy

Context

From the very first verse, we can see that this composition is an individual lament. The psalmist is the focus of a conspiracy that seeks to threaten his life, although he also recognizes that his situation is an instance of a broader pattern of the wicked attacking the innocent.

Although spoken during the crisis, this lament anticipates a reversal that will lead not to his downfall, but to the downfall of the enemy. This reversal is communicated in part by the repetition of certain words. While the enemy shoots arrows suddenly at the innocent (v. 4), God will suddenly shoot them with his arrows (v. 7). They use their words to undermine the righteous (v. 3), but God will use those very words to ruin the enemy (v. 8).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

64:1–6. *The conspiracy of the wicked*

As is typical of a lament, the psalmist opens with an invocation and appeal to God for help (v. 1). He feels that his life is threatened by enemies, who conspire to harm him. Their weapons are their *tongues*; their attack is at least initiated with words. Words can do great harm, as much harm as *swords* and *arrows*. The exact form of these words is never specified. Perhaps they are battle plans or, more likely, false charges in court. The latter can lead to the death penalty after all. As a sign of their malicious intent, the enemy do not announce their plans publicly, but they spring out of nowhere like an *ambush*. In Proverbs 1:8–19, the father warns his son not to participate in the activity of evil people who ambush the innocent for their own gain.

These attacks are not done by individuals, but by a group, who confer with each other before making their move. The emphasis is on secrecy both in their plotting and in the execution of their plans. They want to hide *snare*s in the path of the psalmist in order to trip him up in the journey of life. The word ‘snare’ (*môqēš*) is a fowler’s term and signifies the kind of trap in which a bird is caught and harmed (Prov. 12:13; 13:14; 14:27). Their plots come from a cunning heart. The word ‘cunning’ (*āmōq*) is literally ‘deep’, and in other contexts has a

positive meaning (see Prov. 18:4; 20:5).

64:7–10. *God's response*

In the first stanza, the enemy used cruel words like arrows to harm the innocent. In response, God shoots them with his *arrows*. The enemies shoot *suddenly* from ambush (v. 4); God suddenly strikes them down (v. 7). They want to use their words to harm the innocent; God will use their own words in order to ruin them. This will lead them to public derision (indicated by onlookers shaking their heads, v. 8c). When people see the wicked receive the punishment due to them, it will lead them to a proper attitude towards God (characterized by fear; Prov. 1:7) and worship. In particular, the righteous, who are the objects of God's saving actions, will turn to God for protection, and they too will offer him their praise.

Meaning

The psalm is a model prayer for those who are threatened by people who want to undermine them through speech. They use their words like weapons to hurt the innocent. This prayer calls on God to enter the situation to protect the righteous and also demonstrates awareness that God will ultimately punish the enemy appropriately.

Psalm 65. You care for the land

Context

The psalm thanks God for forgiving sin and for providing for the fertility of the land. The two may be closely connected. It is possible that behind this prayer was a lament complaining about a lack of agricultural produce, accompanied by a sense of sin that led to God's displeasure. If so, then when the rains came and the crops returned, the psalmist and his community would have recognized that their prayers had been answered. God had again reestablished order and banished chaos.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

65:1–4. *You forgave our transgressions*

As the NIV note indicates, there is debate about the proper translation and understanding of the opening colon. Neither the NIV text nor the note follows the Hebrew, but rather corresponds to the Greek translation, which takes the form as a verb from the root *dmh* II, meaning 'to be like/equal' (thus 'befits' and, by extension, *awaits*). The Hebrew is a noun, meaning 'silence', which is derived from *dmh* I. Some believe that 'silence' does not work in a context concerning praise in Zion (VanGemeren 2008: 497). However, Hossfeld and Zenger translate, 'To you silence is praise, O God', and maintain either that 'after the laments of Psalms 51 – 64, the cessation of lament is itself praise of God' or that 'silence is an attitude of confident expectation' (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 138). This view is supported by the likelihood that the Greek translators were trying to make more obvious sense of the verse.

Whichever is correct, the first stanza makes it clear that the psalmist and his community have heard a positive answer to their earlier prayers and now bring their thankful praise and the payment of their vows (gifts that were promised for answered prayers) to God. After all, they have experienced God's forgiveness and his abundant provision. They are those who are permitted to draw close to God as he makes his presence known in the sanctuary (*your courts, your house, your holy temple*).

65:5–8. Wonders of the whole earth

God performs mighty deeds throughout the whole earth, causing all the inhabitants of the earth (*all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas*, v. 5; from the place *where morning dawns* [the east] to the place *where evening fades* [the west], v. 8) to marvel.

Among his awesome and righteous deeds, God formed the mountains by his power. The mountains are a symbol of stability. He *stilled the roaring of the seas*. The sea is a symbol of chaos that is paralleled by the *turmoil of the nations*. Just as he stills the roaring seas, so he stills the turmoil of the nations. As a result, he is the source of all *hope* (v. 5c) and the focus of worship (v. 8c).

65:9–13. God's provision for the land

The psalm recognizes God as the One who brings fertility to the land. In the Old Testament, God's promises focus on the land as the source of his blessing of his people. In Genesis 12:1–3, God promises Abraham that his descendants will be a great nation, which presupposes land. Under Joshua's leadership, they begin to come into possession of the land. This psalm celebrates the fecundity of the land as a gift from God. In particular, the psalmist proclaims that God provides the water that allows the crops to grow.

Meaning

The psalmist thanks God for restoring fertility in the land after a period of drought, whose ultimate cause was the sin of the people. Before giving thanks, the people had probably lamented their condition before God and asked for his forgiveness.

According to Hossfeld and Zenger, verse 7 of our psalm stands behind the motif of the chaotic sea in the New Testament (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 142). Perhaps it is not a specific reference, but it is certainly the case that verse 7, along with the general theme of God subduing the waters of chaos, is called to mind when Jesus stills the waters in Mark 4:35–41 (and parallels). It is also right to see Luke's picture of the end times, when tumultuous waters, indicating chaos, will be stilled by God at the end of the ages (Luke 21:25). Indeed, the book of Revelation makes it clear that heaven (pictured as the new Jerusalem) will be devoid of such chaos ('there was no longer any sea', Rev. 21:1), thanks to the work of the warring Christ (Rev. 19:11–21).

Psalm 66. Come and see what God has done

Context

Many scholars, for instance VanGemeren (2008: 501) and Goldingay (2007: 287), divide Psalm 66 into a hymn (vv. 1–12) celebrating God's past redemptive acts, and an individual thanksgiving poem (vv. 13–20) where the psalmist thanks God for answering a recent request. Such a reading is possible, but, in my opinion, not the most compelling. While the psalm does open by praising God for his awesome deeds in the distant past (vv. 1–7), the crossing of the sea and the Jordan River, verses 8–12 can be understood to refer to a recent rescue of the community. Granted, the psalmist as an individual offers thanks in the final two stanzas (vv. 13–20), but he should be understood as a representative leader (the king?), speaking on behalf of the whole community.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

66:1–4. Praise God!

The psalmist calls on the congregation to heap praise on God for his *awesome* (fearsome) deeds. These deeds, in other words, elicit proper fear of God. Fear implies that God is the centre of all existence and power and that human beings, even kings who are powerful on a human level, are not. Rather, they are dependent on God for everything.

God's enemies, who are in this case also Israel's enemies, show their submission to God (*cringe before you*) on account of his power. Indeed, as God's power is displayed in his deeds (here specifically through subduing the enemy), it leads all the world's inhabitants to acknowledge God's pre-eminence and thus worship him.

66:5–7. Come and see!

The invitation to *come and see* is a call to remember God's past acts of rescue. Verse 6a (*he turned the sea into dry land*) evokes the memory of the crossing of the sea to escape the Egyptians (Exod. 14 – 15), while verse 6b, more properly translated 'they passed through the river on foot', calls to mind Israel's entry into the Promised Land as God caused the waters of the Jordan River to stop flowing

(Josh. 3 – 4).^[91] The waters symbolize the forces of chaos, and God's control over the waters represents his dominance even over human agents of chaos (the enemy). Thus, the psalmist warns the nations not to rebel against God (v. 7).

66:8–12. *He has preserved our lives*

While the previous stanza celebrated God's great acts from the distant past, the psalmist now praises God for saving them in the recent past. The God of the exodus and the conquest is still with Israel, and thus deserves great praise from the congregation. As is typical in the Psalms, the specific nature of the threat is not described, but it was an arduous test that tried the mettle of God's people. The image of the enemy riding over their heads is not used elsewhere, but it communicates dominance. The picture of the community going *through fire and water* indicates the threat to their lives. They were like people brought into a *prison* and given onerous tasks. All this was a part of God's test whereby they were refined like silver. Silver is refined by heating it, and then the dross is poured off in order to obtain pure silver. Thus, these tests result in the purification of the people of Israel. The result was that, after the test, the people were brought *to a place of abundance*. While this stanza does speak of a recent past event, it sounds similar to the experience of the exodus generation, who were in the prison of Egypt, but, after passing through dangerous threats in the wilderness, were brought into a place of abundance, namely the Promised Land.

66:13–15. *I will come to your temple*

God had answered their prayers for rescue, and now the psalmist offers not only verbal praise, but also thanks in the form of animal sacrifices, as well as the payment of vows. A vow was a promise given to God in return for answered prayer (Lev. 7:16; 22:23; Deut. 12:6–7) and is frequently mentioned in the Psalms (13:6; 22:25; 27:6; 35:18; 54:6; 56:12–13; 61:5; 65:1; 69:30–31; 116:1–4; 132:2).

66:16–20. *Come and hear!*

The psalmist is the spokesperson for the community (*those who fear God*) and now gives testimony to God's positive response to his request for rescue. He takes God's answer as an indication of his own blamelessness (*If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened*), and he offers praise to God who has heard the prayer and responded by freeing the people from their enemies.

Meaning

The psalmist, on behalf of the people, praises God for his ‘awesome deeds’ of deliverance, and thanks God for saving him and his community from a present threat. These past redemptive deeds include not only the recent unspecified rescue, but also the earlier redemption at the Re(e)d Sea and the conquest (represented by the reference to crossing the river on dry ground).

Christian readers of this psalm can join in the celebration with enthusiasm. After all, we are reminded of an even greater deed of salvation, the cross of Christ, as we also celebrate God’s response to our own individual prayers for help.

Hossfeld and Zenger interestingly point to verse 18 of our psalm, which states that God would not have responded to this prayer for help if he had sinned, as the background for the healed blind man who challenged the authorities who were questioning Jesus by saying, ‘We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will’ (John 9:31; Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 148).

Psalm 67. May the peoples praise you

Context

Psalm 67 does not fit easily into one of the seven psalm types described in the Introduction. The psalmist calls on God to confer a blessing on his people so that ultimately all the nations might come to know and worship him. Verse 8 does acknowledge that God has indeed blessed Israel with harvest (which may point to a typical time of year in which the psalm was used), and so this is closest to a thanksgiving prayer.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

67:1–5. *May the whole earth praise God*

The psalmist opens with a request for God to *be gracious*, to *bless* and to make *his face shine* on him and his community (*us*). These requests reflect elements of the priestly blessing found in Numbers 6:24–26. God is gracious when he gives his people more than they deserve. He blesses them by granting them an intimate relationship with himself and a harmonious one with other people, as well as providing material benefits such as abundant crops and large happy families.^[92] God's face is a metaphor for his presence. When he hides his face, he withdraws his presence (Ps. 44:23–24). When his face shines towards the psalmist, it signals his warm presence, imparting life and everything associated with life (Pss 31:16; 119:135).

The psalmist has a purpose for desiring God's blessing on Israel. He wants Israel to be a conduit of blessing to the nations and he wants God to make his ways and his salvation known to all the nations. This wish harks back to the ancient promise to Abraham that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Gen. 12:3). It also calls to mind Israel's priestly role among the nations (Exod. 19:6). The psalmist's thought appears to be that, as God blesses Israel, the rest of the nations will find themselves drawn to God and thus join the chorus of praise.

67:6–7. *Thanks for the harvest.*

One concrete manifestation of God's blessing is abundant crops (Deut. 28:4, 12).

And so, the psalmist concludes with an acknowledgment and implied thanks for the provision of the *harvest* and a request that God would continue to provide abundant crops in the future, with the hope, expressed again, that God's blessing on his people will cause those from all nations to adopt a proper, worshipful attitude (characterized by the *fear* of God; see Prov. 1:7).

Meaning

Psalm 67 hopes for the day when God's blessing will extend beyond Israel to encompass the whole world. Indeed, it is through the blessing God would confer on Israel that the nations would be attracted to their God. As we know from a book like Deuteronomy, blessing would follow from obedience (Deut. 28:1). The message of the book of Kings is that blessing never came because obedience was not offered. That said, the Old Testament also presents stories of Gentiles coming to join Israel in worship of the true God (Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, Uriah the Hittite). Indeed, the fulfilment of the hope of Psalm 67 becomes a reality in the New Testament, when Jesus draws to himself both Jew and Gentile.

Psalm 68. Extol him who rides on the clouds

Context

Psalm 68 is hard to categorize. Unquestionably, its original setting is in the context of warfare, and most likely it is a song of thanksgiving for a victory over Israel's enemies. Some of the language and metaphors are difficult to interpret, but even so, the poem's powerful depiction of God as Warrior is impossible to miss. The poem's organization is hard to discern, so much so that the (unlikely) hypothesis has been put forward that it is really a collection of psalm titles (Albright, 1950–51). The best approach is to interpret the psalm as it unfolds, rather than to impose some kind of narrative structure on it.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

68:1–3. Scatter the enemy

The psalmist opens (v. 1) by replicating the words that Moses would utter on the occasion of the breaking of the wilderness camp and the beginning of a day's march (Num. 10:35). The early chapters of Numbers, with its counting of fighting men (Num. 1) and the layout of the camp as an analogy of an Ancient Near Eastern war camp (Num. 2), indicate that the wilderness procession was seen as a military march. The use of the opening words of the present psalm point to the fact that it is a song related to God as the Divine Warrior. The call for God to *arise* indicates that this is a Divine-Warrior song, although typically the psalmist speaks in the imperative rather than the jussive, a verbal form that also indicates a command or exhortation (7:6; 9:19; 10:12; 17:13; 74:22, etc.).

Wax melts quickly before a fire, and the psalmist prays that God would cause the wicked enemy similarly to perish. Elsewhere, even mountains melt before God who appears in judgment (Ps. 97:5; Mic. 1:4). While the psalmist hopes for the enemy to be destroyed, he asks that the righteous might be glad and happily worship in God's presence.

68:4–6. The cloud rider

The psalmist functions as a worship leader, calling on the congregation to worship the Lord. He is the One *who rides on the clouds*.^[93] God rides on a cloud

into battle. This theme comes from Ancient Near Eastern storm-god imagery,⁹⁴ and is frequent in Scripture (Deut. 33:26; Pss 18:9; 104:3b–4; Isa. 19:1; Nah. 1:3). God is a Warrior for the vulnerable, in particular, orphans, widows, the lonely⁹⁵ and prisoners (Exod. 22:22–24; Ps. 146:6–9). On the other hand, those who rebel against him will live in uncomfortable, if not dangerous, places (*a sun-scorched land*).

68:7–10. *Through the wilderness*

The psalmist now looks back on God’s leadership of Israel through the *wilderness*. As mentioned above (vv. 1–3), the wilderness journey was depicted as the march of an army, with God, the war leader, represented by the ark of the covenant, at the head of the procession. The cloud rider is also the bringer of rains that water God’s weary inheritance in which the people settle. This reference must be to the Promised Land, not the wilderness. The fertility that the land enjoys is the result of God’s provision. The language of this stanza is reminiscent of the opening of the song of Deborah (Judg. 5:4), but there the Lord, accompanied by a storm, marches from Edom. In other words, although the language is similar, it refers to different events.

68:11–14. *Celebration*

The *word* is the announcement of the victory won by God the Warrior. The celebration begins with women singing victory songs (see Exod. 15:20–21; Judg. 5; 11:34; 1 Sam. 18:6–7). They also divide the spoils that were taken in battle as the enemy armies rapidly retreat. This picture is being addressed to those who stayed behind (*while you sleep among the sheepfolds*; cf. Judg. 5:16: ‘Why did you stay among the sheepfolds...’). Since they did not participate in the battle, they have no part in the celebration.

The most difficult part of the stanza is the reference to *the wings of my dove...sheathed with silver, its feathers with shining gold* (v. 13). The various opinions include the idea that these are parts of the spoil (VanGemeren 2008: 312), a symbolic reference to doves flying up to announce the victory (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 165), or ‘the women of 12b preening themselves in their new finery’ (Kidner 1973: 240–241). However, certainty eludes us.

The stanza closes by picturing the defeated enemy kings scattering *like snow fallen on Mount Zalmon*, a mountain in the area around Shechem otherwise known only from Judges 9:46–48. Snow would scatter across the mountain and eventually melt away.

68:15–18. *From Sinai to Zion*

The psalmist asks personified *Mount Bashan*, located in the Transjordan, north and north-east of the Sea of Galilee, why it is envious of the mountain where God has chosen to make his presence known. That mountain is Zion in Jerusalem. Relative to Zion, Bashan was physically imposing. But the envy arises because of God's choice of Zion as the location of his temple.

God came to Zion from yet another mountain, *Sinai*, where he entered into covenant with Israel as a nation and gave them the law (Exod. 19 – 24). The *chariots of God* could be a reference to his angelic army or to the army of Israel. The stanza ends with a picture of those rebellious enemies whom God has taken captive. Those he subjugates bring him tribute.

68:19–23. *Our God is a God who saves*

God saves. In the Old Testament, as here, this statement often means that he wins military victories for his people. They have been burdened by their enemies, but God has rescued them from death on the battlefield. He has accomplished this feat by killing the enemy. He brings his enemies from faraway *Bashan* in the east (see previous stanza) and from the *sea* (representing chaos) in the west. The result is a merism (citing the poles of a thing to mean everything in between). There may be a second twist on the merism, since Bashan is high and the depths of the sea are low. God brings the gathered enemy to God's people to experience judgment. The stanza ends with a particularly vivid picture of God's people wading in the blood of their enemies (Ps. 58:10; Isa. 63:3, 6; Ezek. 28:23; also Hathor in the Egyptian 'Deliverance of Mankind from Destruction' and Anat in the Ugaritic 'Baal Myth'), which their dogs lick. The description of dogs licking the blood of the dead is a particularly humiliating picture of the demise of the enemy (see 1 Kgs 21:19; 22:38). While it strikes us as gruesome, we must remember that their enemies exploited and harmed them deeply. Their death is a welcome relief. Kidner put it well when he said, 'This is judgment, not imperialism' (Kidner 1973: 243).

68:24–27. *The procession*

The psalmist speaks as if he is someone in the audience as a procession appears. In the context of this warfare song, the procession is likely a post-battle victory parade, probably heading towards the temple, perhaps even to return the ark of the covenant to its resting place after being with the army on the battlefield (see Ps. 24). As the procession winds its way to the sanctuary, they sing praises to God. Among the singers are women playing the timbrel (see v. 11 above).

Representatives of the tribes are mentioned by name, beginning with *Benjamin*, one of the smallest tribes, followed by *Judah* one of the largest. *Zebulun* and *Naphtali* are two northern tribes. These tribes may be named to represent the whole nation of Israel.

68:28–31. *Bringing tribute to God*

The psalmist calls on God to display his power over the nations as he has in the past. He envisions the nations bringing tribute (*bars of silver*) to God who has subdued them. Specifically, he mentions the powerful *Egypt* and the neighbouring *Cush*, the region in the Upper Nile, south of Egypt, but often under Egyptian control. Egypt may also be intended by the metaphor of *the beast among the reeds* and the *herd of bulls among the calves of the nations*.⁹⁶

68:32–35. *Final call to praise*

The psalmist ends with a final call to praise God. Again, the psalmist calls on God as the Divine Warrior, the cloud rider (*who rides across the highest heavens*; see v. 4 above). He acknowledges that any strength or power Israel enjoys comes from none other than God himself.

Meaning

Psalm 68 extols God as the past, present and future Saviour of Israel, appearing as a Warrior to defeat their enemies. Christian readers of the psalm no longer live in a period characterized by warfare against God's flesh-and-blood enemies, but we are engaged in a battle nonetheless, a battle against the powers and principalities (Eph. 6:10–20). Jesus is our Warrior who defeats Satan by his death on the cross (Col. 2:13–15). Interestingly, Paul cites Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8 in reference to Christ's ascension to heaven, thus depicting the ascension as a military procession leading the captives in parade. Hossfeld and Zenger (2005: 169) suggest that verse 32 of our psalm stands behind Revelation 21:24, which describes how kings will bring tribute to the new Jerusalem. These citations indicate that, even by the New Testament period, our psalm was read and applied to the work of Christ, both in his first coming when he defeated Satan on the cross, as well as at his second coming when he will accomplish a final victory over all evil people and spiritual powers.

Psalm 69. Persecuted because of righteousness

Context

The psalmist (David, according to the title) laments the trouble that has beset his life. He suffers at the hands of his enemies because of his devotion to God. The troubles are not specific, which is in keeping with the purpose of the Psalms to provide templates of prayers for later worshippers who have similar, though not identical, issues. The psalmist turns his anger at his enemies over to God, asking him to bring on them the justice they deserve. His lengthy imprecation (vv. 22–29; see Introduction, pp. 51–52) gives way to praise with which the psalmist ends his prayer (vv. 30–36). It may be that the final three verses, which anticipate God's salvation of Zion and his rebuilding of the cities of Judah, were a post-Davidic, perhaps post-exilic addition.

For the other elements of the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

69:1–4. Initial invocation, appeal for help and first complaint

In his initial words, the psalmist cuts to the chase and simply invokes God and begs him to *save* him. Verses 1b–4 are the initial complaint describing the situation from which the psalmist needs rescue. The description of his plight is highly figurative and utilizes images drawn from ancient mythology. He describes himself as being up to his neck in the *waters*. No knowledge of ancient mythology is needed to understand the psalmist's dire condition, but, in its Old Testament context, the waters are often identified with chaos and connected to ancient stories that root creation in the defeat of gods associated with the waters by a chief god who subdues the waters and creates order (Curtis, 1978; Kloos, 1986; Wakeman, 1973). The psalm may also resonate with the language of ancient water ordeals, in which a person suspected of a crime is thrown into the raging waters and will only escape if innocent. But even without this knowledge, the picture of the psalmist, threatened with drowning, the waters up to his neck and his feet sinking in the mud, communicates that his very life is threatened.

In verse 3, he describes his psychological response by noting his physiological reaction. He is *worn out* by his calls for help. Presumably, it is his appeals that *parch* his throat, and perhaps his *eyes fail* because they are filled with tears or

suffer strain by looking for God. His yelling for help that wears him out is directed to God. The impression is that he is searching for God in the midst of his struggles, but so far to no avail.

The immediate source of his troubles is mentioned in verses 4–5 – his enemies. They irrationally seek to destroy him. Again, it is not specified who they are, but the end of verse 4 hints at how they are trying to hurt him. Apparently, they accuse him of some type of theft. Unfortunately, the historical books do not associate David, the author named in the title, with such a crime, although perhaps Shimei's charge that David stole the kingship from Saul might be relevant (2 Sam. 16:5–14).

69:5–6. *Confession of sin*

While the psalmist denies the specific charge of theft levelled in verse 4, he acknowledges that he is a sinner (v. 5). He realizes that it would be a vain attempt to hide anything from God who can read the heart. His remorse over his sin leads him to pray that God would not use his sin as an occasion to shame the godly. It is true that the sin of believers, and one might think especially of a leader like David, would cast a negative light on the community of the godly, so David prays against that happening.

69:7–12. *Second complaint*

The psalmist returns to complaint, and this time he emphasizes that he suffers because of his faithful relationship with God. His devotion has led to alienation from the community and even from family. In one of many passages from this psalm cited in the New Testament (see *Meaning*), he specifies that his *zeal* (or passion) for God's *house* is what drives him (*consumes me*). God's house is the sanctuary. During David's time, the sanctuary was the tabernacle, but David showed his zeal for the future temple by collecting all the materials needed, as well as organizing the religious personnel (1 Chr. 22 – 29). Even when he engages in religious ritual that shows sorrow for sin (fasting and wearing sackcloth), he is mocked by others. He is even ridiculed by the dregs of society (*drunkards*).

69:13–18. *Further appeals for help*

After the second complaint section, the psalmist again turns to God and appeals to him for help in the midst of his distress. As we observed in the Introduction (see pp. 39–40), one of the crucial differences between the laments of the psalms and the grumblings of the wilderness generation in Numbers was that the former

turn to God for help, while the grumblers ignore God, thinking him incapable or unwilling. The psalmist appeals to God's *favour* (*rāṣôn*) and his *love* (*ḥesed*), concepts grounded in God's covenant relationship. Indeed, the latter word can also be translated 'loyalty', indicating the psalmist's awareness that God has made commitments to the care of the righteous. On this basis, he asks God for his *salvation*. Modern readers need to be careful not to read an overly spiritual understanding of salvation; here it means rescue from the distress brought on the psalmist by his enemies.

In verses 14–15, he reverts to the metaphorical language of the initial invocation (v. 2), as he asks for rescue from sinking into the *mire* and the *deep waters*. Continuing with an appeal to other features of God's covenant relationship with the psalmist (*the goodness of your love; mercy*), he asks for God to make his comforting presence available to him again (*Do not hide your face from your servant*).

69:19–21. Third complaint

By the time we come to the third and final complaint, the psalmist seems exhausted. As he considers the actions and attitudes of his enemies, he piles up words indicating their utter contempt for him (*I am scorned, disgraced and shamed*).

In dealing with his enemies, he had hoped to find some friends. But he could find no-one to support him in his trouble. Indeed, those he approached worsened his plight. Rather than food and water, metaphorically speaking, they gave him *gall* and *vinegar*. Gall is 'a poisonous herb of the carrot family' that can be translated 'poison' (VanGemeren 2008: 532). Food sustains; poison kills. Water would quench thirst, while vinegar would intensify it. For the connection of this verse with the Passion Narrative, see *Meaning*.

69:22–29. A curse on the enemies

Until now, the psalmist has requested his own rescue. Now he asks for the destruction of his enemies. In short, the psalmist begs God to express his anger towards them (v. 24). In this imprecation, he asks for vengeance. He asks that their table, a place where one expects sustenance, would become a trap for them. They would expect good, but he wants them to experience suffering.

He asks for their physical suffering in the form of blindness (*may their eyes be darkened*) and bent backs (v. 23). In verse 25, he wants God to render them homeless, removing them from a place of domestic safety and harmony, even further emptying their tents of family. Verse 26 pauses momentarily from the

horrors wished on the enemy to articulate the motivation. They take advantage of those whom God himself has caused to suffer. In this verse, we see that the psalmist does not blame his predicament entirely on the enemies. They simply worsen the pain. An historical analogy might be seen at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. Israel knew that God was behind the Babylonian attack, but they blamed Edom for taking unfair advantage of the situation (Lam. 4:21–22; Obad.).

The psalmist is quite unforgiving in his attack on his enemies. They have hurt him deeply, and he wants God to show them no quarter. Turning to God the Judge, he insists that God charge them with multiple offences. He does not want God to allow them to taste of his *salvation*. As we observed above, salvation does not have the same meaning in the Old Testament as it does in the New. He is asking God not to rescue them from distress. Indeed, he asks that they be blotted out of the *book of life*. Again, we must be careful to read this in the context of the Old Testament. The book of life is not a list of those who will enjoy eternal life, but rather those who are alive. By erasing their names from the book of life, he is asking that God see them dead. He also tells God not to treat them as if they are *righteous*. Perhaps he envisions the book of life as having two lists: one of the wicked and one of the righteous. He wants to make sure that God puts these enemies in the list in which they belong – with the wicked. For how a Christian should understand these types of imprecations, see the Introduction, pp. 51–52.

69:29. *Final complaint*

The psalmist's anger can be explained by his profound pain and distress. While desiring God to withhold *salvation* from his enemies, he begs God to provide *protection* from the enemies.

69:30–36. *Concluding praise*

While verse 29 signifies the low point of the psalmist's attitude, verse 30 suddenly turns to the height of joy in God. This would be surprising if it weren't typical of the laments (see Introduction, pp. 39–40), which help sufferers articulate their pain, but at the end turn them to God to bolster their confidence. The laments usually do turn from weeping to rejoicing.

The psalmist begins by declaring his intent to turn to God, to *praise his name* with *song* and to thank him. Such praise will please God more than an ox, the thought being intensified in the second colon by saying that it will please God more than a *bull with its horns and hooves*. This reference is to sacrifice, and

sacrifice of the most expensive type, an ox/bull rather than a sheep or a bird (see Lev. 1). God does desire Israel's heartfelt sacrifices, but what he loves most of all is his people's praise. The fact that God wants praise more than a bull is good news, particularly for the *poor*.^[97] Why? Because the poor cannot afford to offer a bull, but they can offer praise to God. Thus, one does not have to be rich to please the Lord.

In verse 33, the psalmist refers to his *captive people*. And then, after calling on heaven and earth as well as the sea and its inhabitants to praise God (in other words every creature, bird, land animal [including humans] and fish), he then states his confidence that God will save *Zion* and rebuild the *cities of Judah*. As mentioned in the introduction to the psalm, this indicates what is likely a post-exilic addition to an originally Davidic psalm. The exile saw great destruction of Judah, and now Israel calls on God to restore it.

Meaning

Psalm 69 is a full lament in the sense that it contains all the elements one might expect in such a prayer (invocation, appeal for help, complaint, confession of sin, imprecation, praise). Thus, it serves well as a model prayer for Christians as they seek God's help in the midst of trouble, particularly when they suffer on account of righteousness and devotion to God.

In addition, Psalm 69 is one of the most often quoted psalms in the New Testament. After all, Jesus is the only truly righteous person, and he was severely persecuted. Thus, the New Testament authors and Jesus himself believed that this psalm found articulation in Jesus' words and deeds.

Jesus tells his disciples, 'If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first' (John 15:18). But does the world have reason to hate Jesus? No, they have seen him do works and speak words that should have convinced them that God had sent him. As it is (quoting Ps. 69:4), they 'hated me without reason'.

When he cleansed the temple courts and drove out the money changers, the disciples remembered what was said in Psalm 69:9a and applied it to Jesus: 'Zeal for your house will consume me' (John 2:17).

Perhaps the most striking application of Psalm 69 to Jesus is found in the Passion Narrative. In the psalm, the composer hoped for someone to comfort him, but instead those around him *put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst* (69:21). He responds by unleashing a harsh imprecation against them. In contrast, Jesus, later given vinegar for his thirst (see Mark 15:23 and parallels; John 19:29), said concerning those who crucified him, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34).

Paul also expressed Jesus' attitude by citing Psalm 69:9b (*the insults of those who insult you fall on me*; Rom. 15:3). For the good of others, Jesus did not please himself.

Psalm 69 also found fulfilment in the history of the early church, as recorded in the New Testament. The imprecation of Psalm 69:25 (*May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents*) found its New Testament fulfilment in the death of Judas (Acts 1:20). Paul applied the imprecations of Psalm 69:22–23 to those among God's elect people who were hardened and did not respond to God through Jesus (Rom. 11:9–10).

Psalm 70. Hasten to save me

Psalm 70 is nearly identical to Psalm 40:13–17. There is some difference in the use of ‘God’ rather than ‘LORD’, since Psalm 70 is in a part of the Psalter (Book II) that prefers to refer to ‘God’ (*’ēlōhîm*). No-one knows the reason why Psalm 40:13–17 became an independent poem. Psalm 40 combines a thanksgiving prayer with the lament of an individual; Psalm 70 is simply an individual lament. For details, see Psalm 40:13–17.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Psalm 71. Protect me when I am old

Context

The psalmist begins, continues and ends with confidence in God's protection as he calls on him to help in the midst of accusations and threats of harm from malicious enemies. He trusts in God's righteousness, and believes that the shame that the enemies want to heap on him will rebound on them. Although there are strong statements of confidence here, this prayer is clearly a lament of an individual. This psalm is one of the few in the first two books of the Psalter that has no title.

Comment

71:1–4. Be my protection

The psalmist opens by affirming that God is his protection and expressing the hope that he might not experience shame. Such an opening is not untypical (see Pss 7, 11, 16, 18, 46, 57), but the first verses of Psalm 71 are closest to Psalm 31 (see commentary there for more detail). From the start, we know that the psalmist is in trouble and needs God's protection once again from evil and cruel enemies.

71:5–8. My hope since my youth

As we will see below, the psalmist is now an old person, and as he looks over his life, he observes that he has consistently placed his confidence in God. God has been his sure refuge for all these years (see also Ps. 22:9–10). So much so that he has become *a sign to many*. That is, he has been a good model to others who have seen him put his trust in God and have observed how God has protected him through the years.⁹⁸ Such a relationship has led the psalmist to worship God continually.

71:9–13. Now that I am old

The psalmist has been a model of confidence in God's protection, but now his life is threatened yet again by people who accuse him (v. 13) and want to harm him. He is now old and vulnerable (*my strength is gone*) and needs God's protection more than ever. They want to shame him (v. 1), but he calls on God to

shame them (v. 13).

71:14–18. Proclaiming your mighty acts

Though beset by troubles, the psalmist has not lost hope in God, nor has his passion to praise God diminished (v. 14). He desires to proclaim God's redemptive acts, which is probably a reference to God's saving acts for Israel (e.g. the exodus), as well as his own personal stories of redemption. Again, he asks God not to abandon him now that he is old, but to maintain their vibrant relationship that he has enjoyed since his youth. He is particularly keen to speak to the young of the next generation (see Ps. 78:1–8).

71:19–21. You will bring me up again

The stanza begins with praise and then moves towards yet another statement of confidence that God can rescue him from his present troubles. God's righteousness is all-encompassing (*reaches to the heavens*), and he has accomplished *great things* (see previous stanza). Therefore, God is incomparable. There is no-one and nothing like God.

Even so, God has made him suffer (*troubles, many and bitter*). That said, the psalmist expresses his firm belief that God will not only restore him, but will bring him to an even better place than before. While his adversaries want to shame him, he knows that God will honour him.

71:22–24. Praising God

The psalmist ends by asserting that he intends to praise God. Indeed, by expressing his intention in this way, the psalmist actually begins his worship of God. God's acts are righteous because he has followed through in his relationship with the psalmist and has thwarted the attempts of his enemies to shame him. Indeed, they have been the recipients of the harm they wanted to bring on the psalmist.

Meaning

This psalm is a prayer of an older person who is in the midst of crisis, brought on by cruel enemies who falsely accuse him (v. 13) and seek to harm him. The psalmist turns to God, and in particular to his righteousness (vv. 2, 15, 19, 24), in whom he has had confidence as his Protector since he was young. He requests protection once more, and asks God not to let his adversaries think that he has abandoned him. The psalmist approaches God with a firm hope that shames his

enemies and restores him to his previous condition.

It has proved tempting through the ages for Christian readers to read a resurrection hope in verses 20–21, but that meaning was unlikely for an Old Testament audience. Even so, in the light of God’s further revelation in the New Testament concerning the afterlife, it is not wrong to understand that language in its deeper sense. After all, while God does restore some sufferers in this life (the example of Job), for many such blessing is anticipated in the next life (Luke 16:25; Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17).

Psalm 72. A prayer for the king

Context

The final poem of Book 2 of the Psalter is a kingship psalm, a prayer for the newly anointed king of Israel. Indeed, it is best seen as a prayer given in connection with the king's inauguration, asking God to give the king a sense of justice for the people, particularly the oppressed. It paints a hopeful picture that this king's influence might extend beyond the borders of Israel to include all the nations of the world, thus bringing to fruition the blessing to the nations promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:2–3).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

72:1–2. *A just king*

The composer beseeches God to grant to the king a sense of justice that will lead to righteous judgments. The *king* (v. 1a) is called the *royal son* (v. 1b), which may well point to this being a prayer for the new king's inauguration. Of course, it is in the interests of the people, particularly the vulnerable, that the king exercise his considerable power fairly. The reference to *your afflicted ones* could mean all the people or perhaps a subset of the people. The book of Deuteronomy (17:14–20) legislates that the king should be observant of God's law and not consider himself better than others. Proverbs has a number of sayings that describe and prize a just king, while decrying an unjust one (Prov. 8:15–16; 16:10, 12–16; 20:8, 26; 25:4–5; 29:4, 14; 31:1–9). By ruling with justice, the king reflects the very character of God himself.

72:3–7. *Prosperity flowing from righteousness*

The prayer requests continue, beginning with the hope for *shalom*. The NIV appropriately translates the word *shalom* as *prosperity*, but could have chosen 'peace' or 'harmony'. Or it is likely that all these meanings might be intended. A king's just rule will result in abundant material and societal blessings.

Verse 4 continues the earlier request for a just king who would not show favour to the powerful, but rather would come to the aid of the weak (*afflicted; the children of the needy*) against their powerful oppressors. Such a king would

be as refreshing and life-giving as *rain* on the earth (v. 6), and he would enjoy the people's wishes for a long reign (v. 5).

72:8–11. *May all the kings submit to him*

Such a just king would benefit the whole world, so the psalmist asks that the kings of the earth might submit to him. Psalm 2 and others picture the kings of the earth plotting violence against God and his anointed one, but this psalm envisions the opposite: the kings of the earth as vassals of God's appointed king. The psalmist uses a number of different phrases (*from sea to sea; from the River [the Euphrates] to the ends of the earth; all kings; all nations*) to refer to the entire world. *Desert tribes*, *Tarshish*,^[99] *distant shores*, *Sheba*^[100] and *Seba*^[101] are all far-flung areas here depicted as submitting to God's appointed king.

72:12–14. *Help for the vulnerable*

Once again, the psalmist extols the king for his protection and help to the vulnerable (*the needy; the afflicted; the weak*). They are the objects of oppression, but the king, like God himself, will use his power to rescue them. To tyrants, the weak are fodder, but to this righteous king their life (*blood*) is precious.

72:15–17. *Long live the king*

The psalmist again (see v. 5) calls for long life for this just king and invites the people, his subjects, to pray for their ruler continually. He also asks that the *gold from Sheba* (see above) flow into his coffers and that the land might experience abundant crops (v. 16). While the psalm pictures all the nations of the earth submitting to this king, it is not just for his or even Israel's benefit, but for their own. It is only by submitting to this just, divinely appointed king that the nations will experience blessing and thus will the promise come true that all the nations will be blessed through the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:2–3).

72:18–20. *Final doxology*

The last three verses belong not to Psalm 72, but function rather as a doxology to Book 2 of the Psalter as well as an editorial comment. For more on these doxologies and for the editorial comment in verse 20, see the Introduction, p. 36.

Meaning

The psalm is a prayer for the royal son on the occasion of his ascent to the

throne. The psalmist hopes that the king will reflect God's justice and righteousness among his people. Such a king will bring prosperity to his nation and will protect the vulnerable. He also asks that the rest of the nations might submit themselves to this king, with the result that they too will experience blessing.

No human king ever achieved the ideal of justice and righteousness described in the psalm. Even Solomon, with his promising start, ended up as an oppressor of his people (1 Kgs 12:4). In addition, no king every succeeded in being a conduit of blessing on all the kingdoms of the world. In fact, the Old Testament story ends with exile in Babylon and restoration as a Persian province.

The sons of David were kings by virtue of God's determination that David's 'throne shall be established for ever' (2 Sam. 7:16). But because of the sin of Israel and its kings, the Davidic dynasty came to an end in 586 BC when Zedekiah was carried off in chains to Babylon. The faithful came to realize that the fulfilment of the promise to David would come in the future, and the New Testament authors clearly recognized that Jesus was the fulfilment of these hopes. Indeed, Jesus is the righteous and just king depicted in the psalm, as well as the One who brings blessing to all the nations of the world. Hossfeld and Zenger see Psalm 72 behind the picture of the wise men from the nations who bring gifts, including gold, to the new-born infant.¹⁰²

BOOK 3: PSALMS 73 – 89

Psalm 73. Struggling with the prosperity of the wicked

Context

The composer of Psalm 73 struggled with the age-old problem of the suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of the wicked, and he wrote the psalm after coming to a place of resolution (v. 1). The connections between this psalm and Proverbs and Job (see *Comment* section) indicate that the psalm is a wisdom poem.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

73:1–2. God is good

As we will see, the psalmist did not come immediately or easily to the conclusion that *God is good...to those who are pure in heart*; rather, it is the ultimate conclusion to his struggle. The psalmist looks back on his struggle, using the metaphor of losing one's foothold. The comment evokes the analogy of the path, which stands for life, and is well known from the book of Proverbs (Longman 2006: 151–155). Everyone is walking on a path, but here the psalmist confesses that he ran into an obstacle in life that unbalanced him.

73:3–12. Feeling envy for the prosperity of the wicked

The psalmist in retrospect is brutally honest about his seething envy for evil people who prosper in this life. Such a situation goes against what should happen. After all, wealth and the good life should belong to the righteous, not the wicked (Prov. 3:9–10; 8:18–19; 10:4–5; 14:24). However, in the psalmist's observation and experience, the opposite was the case. The wicked had no struggles with health or any type of trouble. Of course, it is possible that the psalmist's envy has blinded him to a realistic picture of the wicked. After all, no-one escapes all of life's problems. But the point still stands, since, in the thinking of the psalmist at the time, the wicked should not be enjoying life at all.

The wicked are also extremely proud, believing they are better than others.

They act and speak in a way that breeds violence and oppression. While Proverbs teaches that the proud will fall, here they seem to succeed (Prov. 16:18; 18:12). They also have their supporters or sycophants who just accept everything they do without question (*drink up waters in abundance*; the NIV follows the difficult Hebrew of this verse as closely as possible).

Worst of all, they believe they are beyond God's purview. They continue their evil, proud actions, thinking they will escape retribution (v. 11). They may believe God exists, but they think he is ignorant of their behaviour and/or powerless to do anything about it.

Verse 12 is a summary statement that encapsulates the psalmist's resentment of the wicked. In short, they are trouble-free and wealthy.

73:13–14. *My meaningless life*

While the wicked flourish, the pure in heart, including the psalmist, languish. While the wicked have no trouble, the psalmist's life is full of struggles and pain. The Teacher made a similar observation of life when he said, 'In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness.' He goes on to advise his hearers that they should avoid the extremes of both wisdom and righteousness as well as wickedness and folly (see Eccl. 7:15–18). The psalmist too finds himself questioning whether an innocent life is worthwhile.

73:15–20. *Their final destiny*

As the psalmist looks back on his struggles from his present position of faith (v. 1), he realizes that his reactions to the prosperity of the wicked almost led him to betray the faith, and he would have led God's people (*your children*) astray by causing them to doubt God's goodness.

That said, at the time he was deeply troubled by the prosperity of the wicked and the struggles of the innocent. But a turnaround came when he entered the *sanctuary*. The sanctuary of God could refer to the tabernacle or the temple, where God made his holy presence known among his people. In other words, the psalmist's experience of the presence of God recalibrated his perspective. He now realized that present realities are not ultimate realities.

In terms of the wicked, they may look prosperous now, but they are on *slippery ground* (again evoking the metaphor of the path as the journey of life) and on their way to ultimate destruction. Their life right now has as much reality as a *dream*, but when they awake from the dream, then they will understand that God will arise to judge them.

This is their *final destiny*, but what exactly is meant by this phrase is a matter of great debate. The phrase in Hebrew (*lě'aḥrîtām*) could be understood to point not to the afterlife, but to the future in this life (see the similar issue in v. 25).^[103] We must remember that there is not a clear, robust teaching on the afterlife in the Old Testament (but see Dan. 12:1–3). That said, it would seem a banal point undermined by observation and experience to believe that every wicked person who prospers would fall from their heights before their death. It seems more likely that this passage is talking about one's ultimate fate. As time goes on and God reveals more and more about the afterlife, the psalm's language was, and should be, read as indicating the afterlife.^[104]

73:21–22. A brute beast

The psalmist then returns to assess his previous frame of mind before his intimate encounter with God. He spoke out of ignorance in his complaints. He was not human, but like *a brute beast*. Perhaps here we can see a parallel with Job. Job too questioned God's goodness, since he, an innocent person, was suffering. That is not how it should be, he believed. But when God appeared to him, he submitted to God without an explanation of why he suffered. Indeed, he confessed his ignorance to God, 'Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know' (Job 42:3; Longman 2012: 449).

73:23–26. Into glory

Verses 15–20 describe the ultimate destiny of the wicked (i.e. destruction). Now the psalmist speaks of his own future as living in relationship with God. God will guide him in this life. God is the most important person (heavenly or earthly, v. 25) in his life. The question in this stanza, as in verses 15–20, concerning the wicked is whether or not the psalmist is looking beyond this life to the next when he says that *afterwards* [*'aḥar*; see v. 17] *you will take me into glory*. Again, the words could be taken to refer to the future of this life, but such a teaching would be banal again, since not every innocent person experiences glory at the end of their life. Contrary to the opinion of many scholars, it seems likely that the psalmist himself harboured an eternal hope, and it is certain that, by the time of the New Testament, readers would (and did) read this language as indicating eternal life.

73:27–28. Those who are far and those who are near

The psalm concludes by reiterating the state of the wicked (*those who are far from you*) and of those, like the psalmist, who are innocent (*near God*). The

former will perish, while the latter will be protected (*the Sovereign LORD my refuge*). Thus, the psalmist pledges to bear testimony to God's deeds, something he would not have done in the midst of his disappointment.

Meaning

Psalm 73 expresses what many, if not most, people have felt through the ages as they wondered why some wicked people seem to thrive, while God's devoted people often struggle in life. The question of why bad things happen to good people has occupied the attention of many through the ages. The psalmist bears testimony that the answer to this question does not come by observation or reason alone, but through an experience of God which compels us to look beyond the present into the future. Present realities are not ultimate realities.

God's ultimate answer to our sufferings comes in the form of Jesus Christ, his beloved Son, who entered into our human sufferings to the point of dying on the cross. He was also raised from the dead and now sits on the right hand of the Father. In other words, God *afterwards* did take him into glory (v. 24). And those who are united with Christ can rejoice that, by his resurrection, he is 'the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor. 15:20). If there is a debate about what was in the mind of the author as he spoke of the final destiny of the wicked and righteous alike, no doubt remains today in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Psalm 74. Punish those who desecrated the sanctuary

Context

The psalmist laments the destruction and profanation of the sanctuary at the hands of enemies. The enemies are unspecified, but such destruction is associated with the invasion of the Babylonians in 586 BC (see 2 Kgs 25:8–17). The psalm begins with an appeal to God to turn back his anger and to show favour to his people again (vv. 1–3), followed by a description of the horrible damage done to the sanctuary, presumably the temple (vv. 4–8). After acknowledging God's silence, the psalmist seeks to prod God into action through a series of rhetorical questions (vv. 9–11). At this point, the psalmist acknowledges God's great power by using the language of cosmic conflict at the creation (vv. 12–17), but in light of the absence of divine intervention, he ends the psalm with one more appeal for help (vv. 18–23).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

74:1–3. *Why have you rejected us?*

The lament begins with an invocation to God and an appeal to him to help in the midst of distress. The distress is identified in verse 3 as the destruction of the *sanctuary*, making it likely that this psalm was composed in response to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC. While the Babylonians brought widespread destruction to the city, the focus is on the temple because of its significance as the preeminent symbol of God's special relationship with his people.

The psalmist begins by questioning God's anger against his people. While the Babylonians were the human agents of Jerusalem's destruction, biblical literature is united in seeing God as the ultimate agent and Israel's sin as the motivating factor. As in the book of Lamentations, the psalmist's opening questions (v. 1) imply that 'enough is enough', and he petitions God to turn back his anger. The psalmist further tries to appeal to God's mercy by reminding him of his special relationship with his people. They are the *sheep of his pasture*, for instance. This phrase reminds God that he is their shepherd and thus should protect, guide and provide for them. They are the *nation you purchased long ago*. The Hebrew term

here rendered as *nation* (*‘ēdâ*) could easily be translated ‘congregation’, since it is often used of a religious assembly (Exod. 12:3), but it can also apply in non-religious contexts (Josh. 9:21; *NIDOTTE* 3: 326–328). As the psalmist states, this nation or congregation was *purchased* ^[105] *long ago*, or, according to the second colon of the parallelism of verse 2, they are the *people* ^[106] *of your inheritance, whom you redeemed*. This verse looks back on the exodus, where God established Israel as his chosen nation, the descendants of the family of God rooted in the covenant promises given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). In the third and climactic colon of verse 2, the psalmist calls on God to remember *Mount Zion*, the place that God chose for the construction of the temple and thus his dwelling place on earth.

Verse 3 calls on God to turn his attention to (*turn your steps towards*) the destruction of the temple. The psalmist thus attempts to persuade God to turn against the enemy who brought the devastation and to restore his relationship with his people.

74:4–8. *They burned the sanctuary*

The psalmist continues his cry to God for help by now detailing the destruction that the enemy perpetrated towards the sanctuary, described in verse 4 as *the place where you met with us*. The enemy desecrated this holy place by setting up their standards, presumably a reference to Babylonian battle standards that would have contained idolatrous symbols representing their gods. According to the NIV’s rendition of the difficult Hebrew of verse 5, the enemy is pictured as ripping through the temple like loggers chopping a way through a forest with their axes. Afterwards, they burned the temple to the ground. The psalmist captures the overweening conceit of the attackers who proclaim, ‘*We will crush them completely!*’

74:9–11. *How long?*

The psalmist appeals to God to respond to their calamity. Thus far, he has been silent. No prophet exists to tell them how long their calamity will last. No wonder the psalmist began his prayer with terror that God’s rejection might never end (v. 1; cf. Lam. 5:20–22). The psalmist is mystified as to why God allows the enemy to mock or revile him. In Psalm 2, God ridicules the raging kings of the earth (2:4), whereas here, according to the psalmist, he stands with his hands in his pockets (v. 11b) while they mock him, and so he calls on God to take action against them.

74:12–17. *You crushed the heads of Leviathan*

Even so, the psalmist is fully aware that God is able to save his people. He has the requisite power to do so. He is the psalmist's King and the One who can bring *salvation* (or better, 'victory') on earth by defeating the enemy.

He then illustrates God's power by reciting his creation of the earth by means of the ancient myth of the primordial conflict between God the Creator and the many-headed *Leviathan*. The figure of Leviathan is drawn from Ancient Near Eastern, particularly Canaanite (Ugaritic), mythology, which spoke of a seven-headed sea monster that was defeated by Baal. While Genesis 1 avoids the conflict myth in its equally figurative description of creation, the psalmist exploits the myth in order to declare God's great power over even the most powerful evil force of chaos imaginable.^[107] Thus, the psalmist combines God's defeat of the monster of chaos with statements about creation.

74:18–23. *Rise up, O God*

In conclusion, the psalmist makes a final appeal for help. He calls on God to remember the mocking of the enemy. 'Remember' (*zākar*) suggests not merely mental cognizance, but action. He not only wants God to remember the enemy and to avenge himself against them, but he is also concerned that God does not *forget* his people who are suffering. Again, through the use of an intimate term of reference to Israel (*dove*), he intends to pull on God's heartstrings, calling on him not to turn Israel, his helpless dove, over to the enemy, who are likened to ravenous *wild beasts*. Specifically, he calls on God *to have regard for your covenant*. God is in a covenant treaty relationship with his people. Beginning with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), he had promised to make them into a nation; he would be their God and they would be his people. The psalmist now calls on God to follow through with his covenant promises, and finally implores him to *rise up*. Such a call is frequent in psalms of lament (3:7; 7:6; 9:19; 10:12; 17:13, etc.), because it asks God to come as a Warrior to save his people from dangerous threats.

Meaning

The psalmist calls on the God of power, as demonstrated by his victory over the chaos monster Leviathan, to come and aid the people against their enemies who have destroyed and profaned the temple. This psalm has a number of connections to the book of Lamentations, which also bemoans the destruction of the temple, although it places that destruction in the context of the broader devastation of Jerusalem. Like Lamentations, the psalm does not specify the

Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 587 BC, but this event seems the likely inspiration for both.

If this dating is correct, we know that the temple remained unrestored until the end of the exilic period, when it was rebuilt under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar (Ezra 3 – 6). This Second Temple was the one that Jesus knew (after it was enlarged by Herod the Great). He predicted its destruction (John 2:19). With the coming of Jesus, there was no longer a need for a special holy place, because Jesus himself was the very presence of God (John 1:14), and after he ascended to heaven, he sent the Holy Spirit who dwells in our midst.

Psalm 75. The divine Judge

Context

Psalm 75 contains both the words of the worship leader as well as divine oracles. Because of the latter, the psalm is sometimes called a prophetic psalm. However, it is better to see this psalm as a hymn, which praises God for judging the wicked (see also Pss 7, 9, 95, 96 – 99).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

75:1. Praising God's name

The psalmist, speaking on behalf of the community, declares his intention to praise God, and in so declaring begins the actual praise. God's unspoken *Name*, Yahweh, *is near*, meaning that God himself is near. The reference is probably to the temple, the place God chose 'as a dwelling for his Name' (Deut. 12:11). The people not only proclaim his Name, but they will also recount his *wonderful deeds*, deeds such as the exodus and the settlement of the people in the Promised Land.

75:2–5. Judging the proud

The NIV adds *You say* (which is not present in the Hebrew) to the beginning of the stanza, in order to make it clear that the first-person speaker is none other than God himself. God here proclaims that he is the One who judges, and he does so according to his own timetable (*I choose the appointed time*) and with perfect justice (*with equity*). He is the One who keeps the very earth stable when it *quakes* (probably a reference to earthquakes). On the level of humanity, it is the wicked and proud who have the potential to shake society, but God is there to hold its pillars firm, by decreeing that they neither boast nor challenge heaven. The *horn* is a reference to the horn of an animal which, when lifted high, is a symbol of power. God will not tolerate an assertion of power against himself. *Defiantly* is a translation of the concrete Hebrew phrase 'with a stiff neck'.

75:6–8. The cup of wrath

Since God prevents them (vv. 4–5), no-one anywhere (*east, west or south*

[*desert*]) can exalt themselves. Only God himself can exalt a person, and he typically exalts the lowly, while he lowers those who exalt themselves (Ps. 113:7–9). God is the Judge of humanity. He distributes the *cup* of his judgment that brings the wicked to their knees. The cup is filled with wine that makes a person stagger and pass out (Ps. 60:3) and is a common theme in the prophets (Isa. 19:14; 51:17; Jer. 25:15–38; Nah. 1:10; 3:11).

75:9–10. Praising God who judges the proud

The psalmist, who opened as a spokesperson for the congregation (*we*), now proclaims his own intentions (*I*) to praise God (v. 9). The psalm ends with a last divine announcement (*who says* is implied, but not in the Hebrew). God in his judgments will humble (*cut off the horns*) of the wicked and exalt (or *lift up the horns of*) the righteous.

Meaning

The composer represents the congregation as he praises God who judges boastful, wicked people. Such oppressors often believe that the lack of immediate judgment means that God is not paying attention, but the psalmist reminds them and those who are being oppressed that it is God who picks the right moment to punish the wicked.

The psalmist utilizes the well-known prophetic metaphor of the cup to symbolize God's judgment. Remarkably, in the New Testament, Jesus is the one who drinks the cup of God's wrath as he suffers for our sins on the cross (Matt. 26:42), so we do not have to drink it. That said, those who reject God will experience divine judgment at the end of time (Rev. 20:11–15). They will drink the cup of God's wrath (Rev. 14:10).

Another major theme of the psalm concerns God's humbling of the proud and his exaltation of the humble (v. 7). Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) celebrates how God has 'brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble' (v. 52), anticipating the work of the child who will be born to her.

Psalm 76. God the Warrior dwells in Zion

Context

This hymn celebrates Zion as the place where God makes his presence known (and thus is similar to Pss 46, 48, 84, 87, 122), as well as God as the Warrior who protects his people against their enemies (and thus similar to Ps. 98 and others). In particular, this psalm celebrates a victory over an assault on Jerusalem. No specific event is mentioned, but an example of such a battle would be that attempted by Sennacherib (2 Kgs 19; Isa. 37).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

76:1–3. *His tent is in Salem*

God is *renowned* among his people (*Judah/Israel*). He is great because he is their Protector as Divine Warrior. He is able to stifle the weapons of the enemy (v. 3). He has made his presence known in Jerusalem (*Salem*; Gen. 14:18), specifically on Mount *Zion*, the location of the temple. That this temple is called a *tent* (lit. ‘his booth’) is an archaistic reference to the earlier form of the place of his worship, the tabernacle, but that the location is Zion indicates that we are talking about the temple.

76:4–6. *God destroys the enemy*

Darkness is often associated with evil, but God is *radiant with light* (Ps. 4:6; Isa. 60:19–20). He illumines whatever comes into his presence. The light reveals his splendour and majesty (Ps. 104:2). His majesty is also likened to a *mountain*, a symbol of grandeur, stability and permanence, that *is rich with game*, thus providing abundant provision.

Because of God’s glorious presence, Zion’s enemies will be destroyed. God rebukes them and they die (Nah. 1:4).

76:7–10. *Who can stand before God?*

No-one can resist God when he appears as a Warrior to judge his enemies (the psalmist continues to share themes with Nahum’s opening poem). He exercises his wrath as Warrior in defence of the *afflicted* (the people of Israel), and thus

they praise him, while those who survive his judgment are restrained in their evil.

76:11–12. *Fulfil your vows*

God the Warrior has saved his people, and now is the time to pay their vows. A vow was a promise given to God in return for answered prayer (Lev. 7:16; 22:23; Deut. 12:6–7) and is frequently mentioned in the Psalms (13:6; 22:25; 27:6; 35:18; 54:6; 56:12–13; 61:5; 65:1; 69:30–31; 116:1–4; 132:2). The psalmist calls on all the surrounding nations to bring tribute to God (*the One to be feared*). Although they resist God (Ps. 2:1–3), he will break them so that they will fear him and bring him gifts.

Meaning

Psalm 76 celebrates God the Warrior's protective presence that emanates from Zion, the location of the temple where he makes his presence known among his people. He thus deserves the fulfilment of his people's vows, as well as the tribute of the vanquished enemies.

Today, God does not make his presence known at a specific geographical location, but throughout the world. He is with his people, though, in a special way, as his Holy Spirit dwells in us (1 Cor. 3:16). He also leads us in a battle against the spiritual powers and authorities (Eph. 6:10–20) and will come again as Warrior to defeat all evil people, as well as the spiritual forces that threaten us (Rev. 19:11–21).

Psalm 77. Looking to the past for help in the present

Context

This psalm reveals itself as a lament right from the start. It is the prayer of someone gripped in an impossible situation of trouble. Human strength is of no avail. He has nowhere else to turn but to God, with whom he feels angry disappointment. As with the vast majority of laments, the psalmist ends up praising God and expressing confidence in him. What is unusual about this lament is that it gives a reason for the shift from suffering to joy, namely God's great past acts, in particular, the exodus (see comments on vv. 16–20).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

77:1–2. *Crying to God in the night*

The psalmist informs his hearers that he turned to God for help. His *distress* is unspecified, as is typical in the Psalms, allowing later worshippers to use this prayer as a template for their own address to God in the midst of similar, though not identical, troubles. The psalmist has done the right thing by turning to God for help in the midst of his problems. Indeed, his persistence in petition is indicated by the fact that he prayed to God through the night. His troubles did not let him sleep, and he refused easy answers (*I would not be comforted*).

77:3–6. *First remembrance*

The psalmist's first thought about God does not help him; indeed, it makes him feel even worse. He *remembered* God and *groaned*. When he first turned to the past, it caused him pain, but see below for a more positive remembrance. He blamed God for his distress, in particular for the sleeplessness his troubles have caused him (v. 4). He then thought about the past, and especially his *songs in the night*. Presumably these are hymns of joy, in stark contrast to the laments he now utters in the evening hours. The contrast between the happy past and the agonizing present just heightens his sadness. The composer of Psalms 42 – 43 (originally a single psalm) displays the same emotional reaction, as he remembers his joyful worship in the midst of his depressing present (42:4).

77:7–9. Questioning God

In this section, the psalmist peppers God with a series of questions. He does not wait for answers, but uses these questions in an attempt to prod God into positive action. The questions probe God's faithfulness. Indeed, many of these words are connected to God's covenant. God promised his covenant partners, including the psalmist, that he would be in relationship with them. But the psalmist asks God if he has rejected him forever. In the covenant, God also assured his people that he would show them *favour, unfailing love*, mercy and compassion. But these all seem absent from the psalmist's life, so he wonders whether God has failed on his *promise* (v. 8). These charges are serious and bold, but God does not strike the psalmist dead for his impudence. The very presence of this prayer in the Psalms makes it clear that God invites his people's honest and courageous prayers (see similar questioning in Pss 6 and 88).

77:10–11. The mighty acts of God

This section testifies to a turnaround in the psalmist's thinking. He appeals to the past, and in particular to God's great acts in history (*the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand*). Rather than concentrating and obsessing on his present condition, he resolves to look to the past when God worked his *miracles* of rescue. This turn to the past is different from the earlier one in verse 3, in that it finds concrete focus in God's saving acts. It is on these that he determines to concentrate his attention. This general reference to the past will take a specific direction in verses 16–20.

77:13–15. God is great

His turn to the past leads him from lament to praise. God is no longer seen as the source of his trouble, but as a worker of wonders, who deserves to be recognized as a God above all gods. The remembrance of the past begins to take definite form in verse 15, where he cites a time when God's people (*the descendants of Jacob and Joseph*) were redeemed by God's mighty arm. God's *mighty arm* refers to his acts of power, and typically his acts of power as a Warrior, to rescue his people (Exod. 13:9). More specifically, this language is reminiscent of the exodus, so it is no surprise that the concluding part of the psalm references that great act of salvation.

77:16–20. The crossing of the sea

As the psalmist turns to God's great past acts of rescue, it is not surprising that he focuses specifically on the exodus, God's salvation par excellence in the Old

Testament, and that he recites in particular the occasion of the crossing of the sea, which is the climactic moment of the exodus. Pharaoh had already let the Israelites go, but he changes his mind when they are gone and sets out in vengeful hot pursuit. According to Exodus 14:1–4, God actually instructs Moses to turn back and camp in a seemingly vulnerable area by the sea. When Pharaoh and his chariot troops charge Israel, Moses raises his rod, symbolizing God's presence, and the sea opens up, allowing Israel to go through, but then closes on top of the Egyptians. In this act, God saved his people when they were in distress and completely beyond any human help. The psalmist imagines himself in an analogous situation, but then, by focusing on the exodus, remembers that his God is a God who saves in impossible situations.

As the psalmist retells the story of the sea crossing, he personifies the *waters*. The waters saw God coming and grew afraid. In this way, the psalmist evokes the mythological image of the Creator God who is in control of the sea, representing chaos, and defeats it. God controls the waters of chaos. He created a path through the sea to allow his people to escape to safety. The picture of the Israelites' escape is not that of a mad, disorderly rush, but rather the calm journey of a flock of sheep, guided by their shepherds, *Moses* and *Aaron*. These divinely appointed shepherds were themselves following God, whose *footprints were not seen*.

Meaning

The psalmist moves from trouble to joy, as he reflects on the great acts of God in the past, specifically the crossing of the sea at the time of the exodus. This lament locates the reason for the transition from weeping to crying in remembrance. In the midst of his present distress, the psalmist looks to the past and finds confidence for the present and hope for the future.

Christian readers of this psalm have even more reason to look to God's past acts as they navigate the struggles of life. We live in the period after the coming of Christ, whose great redemptive acts, which the exodus anticipated, are recorded in the Gospels. We can look at the past, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, in the midst of our difficulties, and find confidence for the present and hope for the future.

Psalm 78. So the next generation will know

Context

Psalm 78 is one of the longer psalms in the book, as well as one of the most interesting. The opening stanza presents itself well within the tradition of wisdom literature (see commentary), but then the majority of the poem narrates historical material. In terms of the former, the psalm could be categorized as a redemptive-historical/remembrance psalm, but one must acknowledge the influence of wisdom literature. The psalm utilizes the historical tradition for two main purposes. In the first place, the obvious intention of the psalm is to instruct its hearers to obedience. Ephraim/Israel was disobedient to God and thus rejected. The present generation needs to learn from their negative example and obey God. Secondly, the concluding stanza explains why Ephraim (the northern kingdom) is rejected and celebrates the choice of David and his descendants as leaders of God's people and of Zion/Jerusalem as the place where God makes his presence known.

Comment

78:1–8. Hear a parable

As in Proverbs, the psalmist begins with an exhortation to listen to his teaching (v. 1; see Prov. 1:8; 4:1; 5:1, etc.), and he refers to his teaching as a *parable* (*māšāl*; which can also be translated 'proverb'), a word that appears in the opening verse of Proverbs ('the proverbs [*mēšālîm*] of Solomon'). Parable is paralleled by *hidden things* (*hîdôṭ*), which could also be rendered 'riddles'. A riddle is also a wisdom form mentioned in Proverbs (see 1:6). Further, the ultimate object of his instruction is the next generation (vv. 4–8), again like Proverbs in which a father teaches his son. The psalmist is a sage imparting wisdom that he learned from his ancestors (v. 3) and passing it on to the next generation. However, unlike Proverbs, this parable derives from the history of Israel, as we will observe in the next stanzas. The psalmist can refer to the history of Israel as a parable, not because he denies the events happened, but because he is emphasizing the theological and ethical significance of the events of Israel's past.

Israel's past is not recounted for antiquarian purposes, but rather to model and

encourage loyalty and obedience towards God. Their ancestors were not obedient, and the psalmist wants his generation and the following ones to distance themselves from their actions (vv. 7–8).

78:9–16. *The men of Ephraim*

Ephraim is the dominant tribe in the north (balancing Judah in the south), and here it may stand for the entire northern part of Israel. We are not sure which battle was meant here. Perhaps the psalmist is pointing to the time when the Philistines defeated Israel's army and took the ark when the tabernacle was located in Shiloh, a city in Ephraim (1 Sam. 4 – 6). Another possibility is that he is referring to the time when Saul, the first king who was from the northern part of Israel, was fatally wounded by the Philistines (1 Sam. 31). Finally, it could be associated with the defeat of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 BC (2 Kgs 17). The exact identification is not important for the main point of the psalm, which is to expose the northern kingdom's failure and the central significance of Judah, the home of David and his dynasty, and its centre in Jerusalem.

According to the psalmist, the failure of Ephraim derives from their lack of memory of God's great acts at the time of the exodus. They should not retreat in battle, but have confidence in God their Warrior who had earlier defeated the powerful nation of Egypt, thus freeing the enslaved Israelites. The plagues were *wonders* and *miracles* (vv. 11–12) that demonstrated God's power and served as a prelude to the greatest display of God's strength, namely the crossing of the sea (Exod. 14 – 15). Moreover, after he had rescued them from Egypt, he showed them further wonders during their wandering in the wilderness, when he guided them with a *cloud by day* and *fire by night* (Exod. 40:36–38) and brought water out of *rocks* in order to satisfy their thirst in a dry land (Exod. 17:1–7; Num. 20:1–13; Ps. 114).

78:17–31. *They continued to sin*

The psalmist narrates Israel's rebellions in the wilderness, as we know from Exodus and particularly Numbers. Why the psalmist shifts from Ephraim to the story of Israel in general is not quite clear. Some believe that it was particularly the north that looked to the exodus traditions (Broyles 1999: 320), while others simply believe that 'the spirit of "the men of Ephraim" represents the spirit of Israel as a whole' (VanGemeran 2008: 594). God had demonstrated his power to his people, but they responded with doubt. They tested God constantly in the wilderness (Num. 14:22), including their demands for food. While Psalm 23:5

celebrates God as a host who prepares *a table* for his people, the wilderness generation doubted that God could sustain them. Even though he had provided water from a rock early in their journey (Exod. 17:1–7), they doubted that he could feed them. God was angry and punished them, but then still gave them *manna*. White in colour like coriander seed, manna tasted like wafers made with honey (Exod. 16:31) and olive oil (Num. 11:8). The manna would appear every morning (except on the Sabbath) with enough to satisfy their hunger for the day (and two days on the day before the Sabbath). The psalmist highlights the divine origin of this gift by calling it the *grain of heaven* and the *bread of angels*. Even with this marvellous provision, the people continued to grumble about the steady diet of manna. They wanted meat, which angered the Lord. He gave them meat in the form of quail (Num. 11:4–35), but, as the psalmist reports, he also judged them immediately by sending a plague that killed many of the rebels. The place was thus named Kibroth Hattaavah, ‘Graves of Craving’ (Num. 11:33–34).

78:32–39. God was merciful

Rather than learning their lesson, they continued in their destructive course of sin. As a result, God punished the generation that he had freed from bondage by not permitting them to enter the Promised Land. They were in a horrible cycle. They would sin and God would punish them. Then for a period of time they would obey God, but soon thereafter would begin to sin again (vv. 35–37). Their rebellion took the form of breaking the *covenant* which God had just given them at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19 – 24). Thus, *he ended their days in futility*, and they died in the wilderness. Nonetheless, they rebelled to the bitter end (Num. 25).¹⁰⁸ If God had released his full *wrath*, no-one would have entered the Promised Land, but the forty years in the wilderness allowed them to live out their lifespan. God’s compassion emanates from his awareness of human fragility (*they were but flesh*) and temporality (*a passing breeze that does not return*).

78:40–55. The plagues of Egypt

Again, the psalmist stands amazed at Israel’s persistent rebellion in the wilderness. He is shocked that the people who experienced God’s great redemptive power in Egypt could act in such a way. As in verse 11, he identifies the problem as a lack of memory. To *remember* means more than a conscious awareness of an event. To remember an event like the exodus implies living in trust and obedience to the One who saved them. But they did not, and so the psalmist rehearses many of the particulars of God’s rescue from Egyptian bondage (v. 43; *Zoan* is a city in the region of the Nile delta).

He begins by recounting the plagues. For his purposes, he neither needs to name them all or list them in order (see also Ps. 105; cf. Exod. 7 – 12), but he does end with the final and most devastating plague of all, the death of the firstborn of Egypt (v. 51), commemorated in the Passover (Exod. 12), an event that finally convinced Pharaoh to allow them to leave.^[109]

God, through Moses (see Ps. 77:20), shepherded his people through the wilderness. God's protection began at the Re(e)d Sea (Exod. 14 – 15), the place where he saved his people and judged the Egyptians (*the sea engulfed their enemies*). Not only did God rescue his people from Egypt; he also settled them in the land promised to Abraham by appearing as a Warrior during the time of the conquest, as recounted in the book of Joshua (vv. 54–55).

78:56–64. *They angered God*

For the third time, the psalmist notes that Israel *put God to the test* (see also vv. 18, 41). However, whereas earlier the subject was the first generation who were rescued from Egypt, sinned in the wilderness and died there, now the subject is the generation who entered the land. They are like their *ancestors* in their rebellion and unfaithfulness, like a *faulty bow*, one whose very construction does not allow it to hit the target. They sin in the most fundamental way by worshipping idols, thus breaking the first and most important of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:3; Deut. 5:7). The *high places* are worship sites that may even be dedicated to the Lord, but are prohibited by the law of centralization (Deut. 12). However, if the psalm was written at the time of David, then these high places would have been dedicated to false gods, since the law of centralization did not come into effect until the time when the temple was built by Solomon. That this reference is to a (pre-)Davidic time is suggested by the next historical reference, which was the abandonment of the *tabernacle* and the loss of the *ark*, an event that occurred at the very end of the period of the Judges (see 1 Sam. 4).

78:65–72. *He chose David and Zion*

In one of the most startling metaphors in the Bible, God is likened to a drunken warrior (v. 65). Earlier, God had seemed completely oblivious to what was going on, but now he is aroused from his deep sleep and will spring to action. What is a drunken warrior like when aroused from sleep? Dangerous and violent. God is the Warrior who beats back the enemy, something that was not accomplished by the northern kingdom. God rejects *Ephraim*, the north (and its kings [Saul; Ishbosheth]), and rather chooses *Judah* as the tribe from which Israel's king will

come. Specifically, he chooses *David*, who started out shepherding sheep, but spent the rest of his life shepherding the people of Israel. He also chooses *Mount Zion*, the location of the temple, as the place where God makes his presence known among his people.

Meaning

Psalm 78 instructs its hearers to obey and not be like the people from the north (*Ephraim*) and Israel at large who disobeyed God and his law. The psalm also celebrates the rejection of the north and the election of the south, in particular Jerusalem (*Zion*) and its king, David and his descendants (2 Sam. 7).

The psalm thus employs redemptive history to make an important theological point. Using Israel's past, it explains why God does not choose a northern king or a northern location for his sacred place, but rather he selects David and his descendants and the temple in Zion. The former disobeyed and took the lead in expelling Israel's enemies. Thus, future hope is centred on David's line.

The New Testament reader knows that David's line also failed to be obedient. His descendants did not manifest David's repentant heart. The southern kingdom comes to an end in 586 BC, when the last Davidic descendant to rule is deposed by the Babylonians who also destroy the temple. While the temple is rebuilt in the post-exilic period, Israel never again has a son of David ruling from Jerusalem. However, the Davidic covenant promised a son on the throne forever (2 Sam. 7:11b–16), thus raising expectation of a future event during the intertestamental period. The New Testament understands Jesus to be the fulfilment of that expectation: the Messiah or anointed King. He is the greater Son of David. In addition, while the temple was rebuilt, the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans, an event anticipated by Jesus (Mark 13:2). The New Testament teaches that Jesus himself is the very presence of God and thus the fulfilment of the temple that was a symbol of God's presence on earth (John 1:14; 2:17; Longman 2001: 63–74).

Psalm 79. From the rubble of Jerusalem

Context

Psalm 79 is a communal lament, calling on God to restore his people after a foreign invader has destroyed Jerusalem, killed many of its inhabitants and defiled the temple. Like Psalm 74, the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC appears to be the background of the psalm (2 Kgs 25; 2 Chr. 36:15–23).^[110] The psalm shares many similarities with the book of Lamentations, which is best understood as an appeal to God to restore Judah after its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. Both texts acknowledge Judah's culpability, but appeal to God's pity, suggesting that the punishment has gone far enough and now is the time for restoration.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

79:1–4. *The nations have invaded Jerusalem*

The poet gets right to the point by telling God that the nations have invaded the land, referred to as *your* [God's] *inheritance*. The Lord made his dwelling in the land, thus making it his inheritance (Exod. 15:17). The psalmist is referring to the land as God's inheritance in order to move God to pity. This land is his land, and foreigners have invaded it. They have defiled *your* [God's] *holy temple* (Ps. 74:4–8), the verb signifying the fact that the land was holy because of God's presence. Indeed, the land and the people of Israel are called 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod. 19:6). While the psalmist refers to the land itself as God's inheritance, there is also a sense in which this description refers to the people of Israel (Deut. 4:20; 2 Sam. 21:3).

Next, the psalmist appeals to God's heart by describing those killed by the invaders as God's *servants*. Not only were they killed, but they never received a proper burial, adding insult to injury. Indeed, the destruction of Jerusalem, the death of its inhabitants and the defiling of the temple bring on the scorn of their neighbours. We know from other texts that neighbouring nations like Edom derived considerable satisfaction from the humiliation of God's people (Ps. 137:7; Jer. 49:7–22; Lam. 4:22; Obad. 10–14).

79:5–7. *How long, Lord?*

The psalmist continues the lament by asking *How long?* – a question found in a number of prayers (4:2–3; 6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:10; 80:4; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84). The phrase indicates that the sufferer has been long in his pain and sees no terminus in sight. He thus appeals to God’s pity, suggesting that perhaps ‘enough is enough’. The poet in Lamentations communicates the same point at the very end of the book when he asks,

Why do you always forget us?
Why do you forsake us so long?
(5:20)

Lamentations follows these questions with the appeal for God to restore them. The psalmist asks God to redirect his wrath away from his people and towards the pagan nations who caused the devastation (Jer. 10:25 is almost identical to vv. 6–7).

79:8–13. *Help us*

The NIV gets it right when it translates ‘Do not remember...’ as *Do not hold against us the sins of past generations*. That is precisely what the psalmist is asking, in the realization that the destruction of Jerusalem was because of the sins of God’s people. By virtue of the fact that they are turning to God for help, they communicate their repentance and now want God to move beyond judgment to restoration. After all, the prophets did promise that God’s remnant would be restored and that Jerusalem itself would be rebuilt (for one striking example, see Jer. 31:31–40). Importantly, the psalmist appeals to God’s glory as motivation for him to restore his people. Otherwise, the nations will scorn not only God’s people, but God himself. To them, their defeat of Jerusalem is a sign of God’s impotence. Thus, the psalmist calls on God to avenge the destruction of Jerusalem and thereby encourage his people’s perpetual praise. In verse 13, the psalmist likens his people to *sheep* and implies that God is their shepherd (Ps. 23). We should also take note of the previous two psalms in which Moses and Aaron (77:20) and David (78:70–72) are called shepherds of Israel.^[11]

That God could punish a nation that he used to punish his people is made clear in Jeremiah 50 – 51, which is a judgment oracle against Babylon. God used Babylon to destroy Jerusalem. However, the Babylonians did not do their work for the glory of the true God, but for their own glory and that of their false gods. For that, the Babylonians themselves deserve punishment.

Meaning

Psalm 79 bemoans the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of an invading army that defiles the temple. The psalmist recognizes that the past sins of God's people have led to this judgment, but the emphasis is on appealing to God's pity in order to bring a reversal from judgment to restoration. In addition, the psalmist expresses hope that God will punish those who have treated his people so horribly.

The post-exilic prophets (see e.g. Zech. 1:12–17; Goldingay 2007: 529) and the account of the return from exile in Ezra and Nehemiah bear witness to God's positive answer to the psalmist's request. After all, God used Persia to punish Babylon, and the Persians allowed the Israelites to return to their land and rebuild the temple and their society. That said, God's people remained under the thumb of foreign oppressors. The ending of Nehemiah (ch. 13) leaves one with the impression that more must come in the future. The New Testament recognizes Jesus as the One who will lead God's people, as a shepherd leads his sheep (John 10).

As mentioned above (see *Context*), this psalm is more closely tied to a specific historical context than most others. Even here, however, the details are not given. As we move to the New Testament period, we can use this psalm as a guide to prayer when God's people are attacked, either individually or corporately. We call on God to help us, knowing that Jesus is the Divine Warrior who fights on our behalf against evil.

Psalm 80. Make your face shine on us

Context

The psalmist speaks on behalf of the community and asks God to save them, in a manner typical of a corporate lament. This psalm is notable for its use of a thrice-repeated refrain (vv. 3, 7, 19) and a striking use of the metaphor of God's people as a vine.

At first reading, it appears as though it should be possible to provide a particular historical dating of the psalm. After all, it refers to Israel as Joseph and mentions the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh specifically, which might be taken as a reference to northern tribes. From a reading of the historical books, two crises come to mind: (1) the threat from Tiglath-pileser III in the mid-eighth century (2 Kgs 15:29), and (2) the Assyrian attack that resulted in the demise of the northern kingdom (2 Kgs 17:3–4). Indeed, the Septuagint adds 'concerning the Assyrians' to the title, which would point to either or both of these events. However, as Kraus points out, neither of these fits precisely, and it is not at all definite that Benjamin was counted as a northern tribe. Thus, the historical setting that inspired this poem is uncertain. Indeed, the reference to God as enthroned above the cherubim indicates a connection with the theology of the Jerusalem temple, and thus a southern perspective.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

80:1–2. *Shepherd of Israel*

The psalmist refers to God as the *Shepherd of Israel* (perhaps providing a link back to 79:13) in the appeal to God to listen to their prayer. God is the Shepherd of his *flock* Israel, here also described as *Joseph*, probably indicating the northern kingdom, underlined by the specific naming of three of the northern tribes in verse 2 (*Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh*). God as Shepherd (Pss 23:1; 78:52; 121:4; see also Gen. 48:15; 49:24 as well as Isa. 40:11; 49:9–10; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:11–16; Hos. 13:5–6; Mic. 7:14) guides and protects his sheep, and that is what the psalmist is calling on him to do now in the midst of their distress. God is also the One who sits enthroned above the cherubim, a reference to the cherubim who extend their wings with their heads down over the

ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:10–22). The ark is the footstool of God’s throne, and the cherubim face downwards because of God’s immense glory. The ark is also the portable symbol of God’s presence, and it often accompanied the army in battle.

The psalmist asks God to *shine forth*. God is light, and when he appears he appears as light (Deut. 33:2; Ps. 50:2). Until now, it is as if God has been asleep, but now he calls on God to *awaken* and come to rescue them from their enemies.

80:3. *Make your face shine on us*

Here is the first statement of the psalm’s refrain (see also vv. 7, 19) calling on God to restore his relationship with his people by saving them. Thus will he show his positive attitude towards them, as indicated by the idea that God will cause his face to shine on them (see the priestly blessing in Num. 6:25; also Pss 31:16; 67:1; 119:135). This implies God’s ‘joy and favor’ (Hossfeld and Zenger 2005: 314).

80:4–6. *How long?*

The psalmist continues the lament by asking *How long?* – a question found in a number of prayers (4:2; 6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:10; 79:5; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84). The phrase indicates that the sufferer has been long in his pain and sees no terminus in sight. He thus appeals to God’s pity, suggesting that perhaps ‘enough is enough’. The people have been praying, but God in his anger has not been listening. It is God who has made them suffer. Their food (*bread of tears*) and their drink (*tears by the bowlful*) have been their agony. The psalmist also appeals to God’s pity by pointing out that their enemies have mocked them, God’s chosen people, because of their suffering.

80:7. *Make your face shine on us*

See 80:3, 19.

80:8–11. *The transplanted vine*

Israel is likened to a *vine*. Since verse 1 refers to God’s people as ‘Joseph’, it is of particular interest that Jacob’s blessing on Joseph begins:

Joseph is a fruitful vine,
a fruitful vine near a spring,
whose branches climb over a wall.
(Gen. 49:22)

This vine was transplanted from *Egypt*, an obvious reference to the exodus. God

cleared the ground for it, a reference to the conquest of the Canaanites, and in its new location the vine flourished. The people of God as the nation of Israel came to control the whole of the Promised Land from the (Mediterranean) *Sea* to the (Euphrates) *River*. While vines are not notable for their *shade*, this vine, representing Israel, is able to provide shade (protection) for the mountains and also for the mighty cedar trees. This figurative depiction highlights how God has blessed Israel, his precious vine.

80:12–15. *The ravaged vineyard*

God planted the vineyard and made it flourish, but he has also *broken down its walls*. The vine is Israel, and the wall protected the vine (Israel) from outside threats. But now Israel is at the mercy of everyone who passes by (they pick the vine's grapes). The vine is even open to the depravations of other creatures (*boars and insects* ¹¹²).

In the light of the deprivation of the vineyard and its vulnerable condition, the psalmist urgently asks God to return, invoking him again with his battle name (*God Almighty*, traditionally 'God of Hosts'; see v. 4). He calls on God, who is not present with them, to attend to their situation and then return to help them. ¹¹³ The vine, Israel, needs him, as does the king (the son...you have raised up for yourself). The reference to the king as God's son connects to the Davidic covenant in which God promised that David would have a descendant on the throne forever, and that the king 'would be his son' (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7).

80:16–18. *Revive us*

The psalmist has no doubt about who is responsible for their pitiable condition, nor is there any doubt about who can rescue them – God. Thus, the psalmist requests that God enable (*let your hand rest on*) the king (*the man at your right hand*). After all, God had given them the king. Once God returns and helps them, Israel will not repeat their mistake of turning away from him. On the contrary, they will worship him (*call on your name*).

80:19. *Make your face shine on us*

For a third and climactic time, the psalmist calls on God to restore them to his good graces (see vv. 4, 7).

Meaning

The psalmist calls on God in the midst of a threat to the community to come in

power to save them. They recognize that God has punished them, but now they call on him as Warrior to rescue them. The psalm speaks of God's people's special position and also their present predicament, using the figurative language of a vine (see also Isa. 5:1–7; 27:2–6; Jer. 2:21; 12:10; Ezek. 15:1–8; 19:10–14; Hos. 10:1).

Reading the psalm from a New Testament perspective brings our attention first to the reference to the king, the 'son of man you have raised up for yourself' (v. 17). While not cited in the New Testament, the passage cannot be read by a Christian without evoking a connection with Jesus, the Son of Man, who is the Christ (the anointed King).¹¹⁴ Secondly, our attention is drawn to John 15:1–6, where Jesus presents himself as the vine and his followers as the branches. In the light of other New Testament passages in which the kingdom is described as a vineyard (Matt. 20:1–11; 21:33–43), Jesus is saying that participation in the kingdom depends on his followers being united with him.

Psalm 81. Honey from the rock

Context

Psalm 81 begins with an exuberant call for the community to worship God with song in the context of a festival, which we can identify as Tabernacles (see vv. 1–5b below). The poem takes an unexpected turn in verse 5c, when the poet announces an unknown voice speaking. The speech, clearly God's, occupies the rest of the psalm. It evokes God's past saving acts, particularly the exodus from Egypt, and also calls Israel back from their disobedience. The implication is that the people suffer because they do not exclusively follow God. Thus, while the poem begins like a hymn, it implies a period of disorientation in the community's life (thus raising expectations of a lament), and it is dominated by a divine oracle. The presence of the oracle leads many interpreters to identify Psalm 81 as a prophetic psalm on the assumption that a temple prophet speaks the words in verses 6–16.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

81:1–5b. Praising God at the New Moon festival

The psalmist, as worship leader, calls on the community to worship God with song and instruments (*tambourine, harp, lyre, ram's horn*). Their praise is to be exuberant. Verse 3a refers to the *New Moon*, the first day of the month according to Israel's lunar calendar (and a religious festival).^[115] Verse 3b then speaks of the full moon and the day of the festival, which is the fourteenth day of the month and thus points to the festival of the seventh month (September/October), which occurred between the first and the fifteenth day of the month, beginning with the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) and then continuing with the Feast of Tabernacles established in the aftermath of the exodus.

81:5b–10. An unknown voice

This psalm suggests that the New Moon festival had a special connection with exodus traditions, and thus the *unknown voice*, which is clearly God's, now reminds the community of his great rescue from Egypt and guidance through the wilderness, as well as their obligation to obey his law given at Mount Sinai. That

God's voice was at first unknown to the psalmist emphasizes God's otherness and transcendence.^[116]

It was God who literally removed the *burden* from their shoulders and their hands from the *basket* as he freed them from their forced labour in building the Egyptian cities of Pithom and Rameses (Exod. 1:11). They cried to God in their distress (Exod. 2:23–24; 6:5), and he answered them out of a *thundercloud*. While no mention is made of a thundercloud in the account of the Re(e)d Sea crossing in Exodus, later tradition pictures God fighting out of a thunderstorm against the sea itself (Ps. 77:18–20).^[117]

After their liberation from Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness, and God tested them at *Meribah*, where, as the name itself indicates, they quarrelled with God (Exod. 17:1–7; Num. 20:1–13; cf. Num. 27:14; Deut. 32:51; 33:8; Pss 95:8; 106:32). Their disobedience at Meribah is typical of Israel's rebellion against God. God warns them of the most fundamental law (see the first commandment: Exod. 20:3; Deut. 5:7) that they should worship only God. After all, he, and only he, rescued them from Egypt (v. 10ab quotes the preamble to the Ten Commandments [Exod. 20:2]). Not only did he rescue them, but he promised to provide for them. Thus, the stanza closes with God telling his people that they need only open their mouths and he would feed (*fill*) them.

81:11–12. Disobedient Israel

The sad truth, though, was that his people did not obey the God who had rescued them from their bondage in Egypt. Thus, God has, in effect, given up on them, allowing them to go their own stubborn way.

81:13–16. Turn and be rescued

One can hear the plaintive tone of God's voice in verse 13 (*If only*), as he expresses his wish that his people would obey him. Obedience brings victory over enemies, as the covenant blessings indicate (Deut. 28:7), as well as the example of Joshua's victory over Jericho (Josh. 5:13 – 6:27). Victory comes to those who love God, but defeat to those who hate him. The same may be said regarding the provision of food. If Israel obeys, they will not only be fed, but will receive the finest foods. In the wilderness, God provided water from the rock at the incident at Meribah referred to above, but here he promises *honey*, a luxury item, *from the rock* (Deut. 32:13).

Meaning

In Psalm 81, we hear God himself reminding his people, in the context of the

celebration of the Festival of Tabernacles, of his great act of salvation in the exodus event where he freed them from Egyptian slavery. He also chastises them for not obeying him and thus explains why they struggle at the hands of their enemies and why food supplies are short. He urges them to obey.

Christians no longer celebrate Tabernacles, but we do look back on the exodus as a stirring story of God's redemption. Indeed, we look back as well to the fulfilment of the second exodus hopes of the prophets in Jesus Christ, whose very life is patterned on the story of the exodus and wilderness wanderings and whose death took place on the eve of the Passover. Christians too should remember God's salvation and follow God obediently and with worship.

Robert Godfrey notes that the obedience of Jesus, God's Son, stands in opposition to the disobedience of Israel as addressed in Psalm 81: 'Jesus perfectly listened and followed so that His people would have a complete and perfect salvation' (Godfrey 2013: 67). He goes on to point out that Christians are called by God to listen to the words of his Son (Matt. 17:5): 'The salvation and health of the church depend on it continuing to listen to God's Word' (Godfrey 2013: 67).

Psalm 82. Judging the gods

Context

Like Psalm 81, this psalm is difficult to connect to a specific type and, like the previous psalm, it contains a divine oracle. The psalmist introduces God's speech (v. 1) and then comes in at the end to encourage God's judgment of the gods (v. 8). God's speech (vv. 2–7) upbraids the gods' failure to protect the vulnerable, which implies that the latter are suffering. Thus, we might consider this psalm an unusual lament of the community that places its hopes in the judgment of God against those who are charged to help them.

But who is it that is so charged? Some believe that the gods are human judges and that gods ('*ēlōhîm*) have that meaning in Exodus 21:6; 22:8, 28. However, it is doubtful that these passages point to human judges. It is preferable to understand the reference as to the spiritual powers and authorities whose task it is to carry out God's work among humans (see below).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

82:1–4. God in the assembly of the gods

The opening verse serves as an introduction to a divine speech before the *great* ('*adat-'el* is better translated 'divine') *assembly*. The second colon of verse 1 indicates that the assembly is composed of the *gods*. The NIV adds quote marks to *gods*, but these are not found in the Hebrew. It is easy for a modern reader to misunderstand the reference. If there is only one God, then how can there be multiple gods? Psalm 82, though, is not the only passage that implies or explicitly states that there are multiple gods. For instance, an example of the latter is Exodus 12:12, where, on the evening of the Passover, God announces his victory over the Egyptian gods. In terms of the former, the exclamation that God is greater than other gods implies that there might be other gods (Exod. 15:11; 18:11; Pss 86:8; 138:1; also implied in the first commandment [Exod. 20:3]).

How are we to understand this language? Sometimes the Hebrew term 'god(s)' ('*ēlōhîm*) is used to refer to all spiritual beings, not only the one God who created everything and everyone, including the other gods. In other words, sometimes 'god(s)' is used to refer to what we call angels and demons. Thus, the

picture the psalmist summons for our mind is God addressing his angelic assembly (see Job 1 for a picture of the angels [the ‘sons of God’] gathering for a meeting; Longman 2012: 81–83).

That the gods are not equal with God is seen in the fact that he presides over the divine assembly and in the following speech where he upbraids them for their woeful behaviour.

How long is a question often asked of God in the book of Psalms (for references see Ps. 4:2–3). The question implies that matters have gone on long enough and should come to an end. In particular, God rebukes the angels (gods) for not upholding justice for the vulnerable (*the weak, fatherless, poor, oppressed, needy*) who are without aid and have no resources to combat those who want to take advantage of them (*the wicked*). For God’s concern for the vulnerable, see Exodus 22:22–24; Psalms 68:5–6; 94:4–7; 146:2–9, *passim*.

82:5. *The failure of the gods*

Verse 5 speaks about the gods, whereas the preceding and following verses address them directly. God’s criticism of them stems from their failure to care for the needy who especially require their help. The accusation that they know nothing indicates more than mere lack of information; it is a lack of action. They fail to do what they have been assigned to do. And thus the world is not well ordered and stable.

82:6–7. *A warning*

God ends his speech with a severe warning: either get on with the task of taking care of the helpless or be demoted. The gods are not equal to God, not even close. He has the ability to render them mortal.

82:8. *Rise up, O God*

The psalmist has the last word in the poem. He encourages God in his chastisement of the gods, calling on him to judge not only the gods, but all the earth. The phrase *rise up* is reminiscent of the call for God as Warrior to wage battle against the enemy (see commentary at Ps. 7:6–9).

Meaning

Psalm 82 calls on God to rise up in defence of the vulnerable (v. 8). In the body of the psalm, God speaks harshly to the gods (the angelic powers), directing them to do the work assigned to them or suffer the consequences. These gods

have not (yet) gone over to the dark side, since God still allows them the opportunity to do the right thing. However, there are also those spiritual beings who do resist God's reign, but they do so futilely. John Goldingay is helpful in connecting this psalm to the biblical theme of God's judgment of the dark spiritual powers and authority. Summarizing his survey, he points to Isaiah 24:21, which teaches that God will have victory over both evil human and spiritual rulers on the final day, and he compares that to our psalm where God will judge the gods 'within history'. He goes on to comment:

...the NT picks up that idea. The heavenly powers were created in or by Christ and through and for Christ (Col. 1:15–16), and by dying Christ has defeated and dethroned them or divested himself of them, and triumphed over them (Col. 2:15). They are subject to him (1 Pet. 3:22), and they cannot separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:38–39). Yet we still battle against them (Eph. 6:12). Evidently they are still capable of asserting themselves, and we still look forward to God's final judgment on them (1 Cor. 15:24–25). And we still pray for God's authority to be exercised over them in the now (Eph. 6:12, 18), as the psalm does.
(Goldingay 2007: 570)

We cannot leave the subject of Psalm 82 without considering the one occasion when it is quoted in the New Testament. Jesus cites verse 6 in response to the Sadducees' charge that he was claiming to be God, saying, 'Is it not written in your Law [the Old Testament as a whole], "I have said you are 'gods' [citing the Septuagint rendering]? If he called them [the Jews] 'gods', to whom the word of God came – and Scripture cannot be set aside – what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, "I am God's Son"?' (John 10:34–36). Jesus is defusing the Sadducees' charge of blasphemy by offering a rather literal interpretation. His tactic is effective, but does not require us to adopt the same interpretation, since he is presenting what Carson calls an *ad hominem* argument that 'does not require Jesus to subscribe to the same literal exegesis as his opponents' (Carson 1991: 399).

Psalm 83. Make them like tumble-weed

Context

The psalmist calls on God to destroy enemies who threaten the existence of Israel. This community lament lists the names of particular foes, but rather than indicating a specific historical moment, these are the traditional enemies of Israel, and thus the psalm could have been used in any similar conflict (see commentary on vv. 5–8).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

83:1–8. *The plots of the enemy*

The psalmist appeals to a silent God for help against dangerous enemies who threaten the community. At present, God has not made his presence known, but the psalmist's prayer intends to change God's stance by drawing his attention to the threatening plots of those who want to destroy God's people. The description of the enemy sounds similar to that in the opening stanza of Psalm 2; in both, they desire to challenge God's people (*those you cherish*). In this psalm, they want to eradicate Israel completely (*that Israel's name is remembered no more*).

Typically in the Psalms, the enemy is anonymous and not given a specific name. After all, the psalms are not historical memorials to particular events, but rather poems that can be used for situations that are similar, though not necessarily identical, to the events that inspired their composition (see the Introduction, p. 32). Psalm 83 appears to be an exception, as verses 6–8 list tribes and nations that have allied against Israel. Even so, attempts to identify a particular moment when Israel faced these enemies at one time have proved impossible. Thus, here we have a listing of traditional enemies, and, accordingly, this psalm too could be used in a variety of different specific situations.

83:9–16. *Destroy our enemies, God*

The psalmist levels a series of imprecations on the enemy, the first based on historical analogies from the time of the judges. *Oreb* and *Zeeb* (Judg. 7:25; 8:3) and *Zebah* and *Zalmunna* (Judg. 8:1–21) were Midianite rulers who had occupied Israelite territory. Gideon, the judge, defeated them. *Jabin*, the king of

the Canaanites, and *Sisera*, his commander, were defeated by the Israelite commander Barak under the judgeship of Deborah (Judg. 4 – 5).¹¹⁸ Perhaps the period of judges is brought to mind because the situation that inspired the psalm was similar, that is, a foreign nation that had taken possession of Israelite territory. In any case, the psalmist understands that behind the human judges stands God the Divine Warrior who was actually responsible for Israel's victory. He asks that God make their present enemies like *dung on the ground*, a stinking pile of refuse that will ultimately fade away.

Verse 13 continues with a metaphor that expresses the psalmist's wish for the enemy's demise. *Tumble-weed* and *chaff* are rootless and windblown vegetation, dead, not alive (Ps. 1:4–5). A *fire* in the forest spreads quickly and results in the utter destruction of anything in its path. The psalmist wants God to harm the enemy, not just to rescue his people, but to shame them and to cause them to acknowledge God's greatness (*they will seek your name*).

83:17–18. *You alone are Most High*

The final stanza expands upon the thought of verse 16. The psalmist wishes the enemy to be humiliated in their defeat by God. But he also wants them to know that the Lord alone is the *Most High*. It is likely significant that the Ugaritic equivalent of Most High ('*elyôn*) is the most common epithet of the Canaanite god Baal. It indicates that Israel's enemies were worshippers of false gods like Baal, and that God's victory over them would demonstrate the Lord's superiority over false gods whose worship had so tempted the people of Israel through the years.

Meaning

Psalms 83 desires to rouse God from his aloof silence and come to Israel's aid as they are threatened by hostile enemy forces. Israel's enemies are God's enemies in this psalm, and God should make his presence known by destroying those who are trying to destroy his people. Christians too, as individuals and sometimes as a community, come under threat, and Psalm 83 can be a model prayer for God's help. Many feel uncomfortable with the psalm because of its expresses a desire to destroy the enemy (see the Introduction: Imprecations, pp. 51–52). However, the imprecations are a way of turning our anger over to God. After all, the psalmist is not asking God for resources to do it on his own, but rather he is petitioning God, who can decide himself how he should act. In other words, the psalmist is acting in the spirit of Romans 12:19: 'Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is

mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.’

Psalm 84. How lovely is your dwelling-place

Context

Psalm 84 is a song that celebrates Zion as the place where God makes his presence known. For other Zion songs, see Psalms 46, 48, 76, 87 and 122. The predominant emotion of the psalm is a rapturous yearning to be in the temple precincts. The psalm also suggests that it was sung during pilgrimage. Interestingly, there is a single petition (vv. 8–9) on behalf of the king.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

84:1–7. Blessed are those who are close to God

The speaker cannot contain his emotions as he thinks of the temple (*your dwelling-place*). He finds himself irresistibly drawn to that beautiful structure. The temple's architecture and ornamentation were physically beautiful (1 Kgs 7), but also spiritually lovely, since it was the place where God made his presence palpable. The psalmist's yearning for the temple was a yearning for God; indeed, his language of desire is reminiscent of the opening verses of Psalm 42.

Verses 5–7 suggest that the psalmist is with worshippers who are making their way to the temple on *Zion*. His desire grows as they get closer. On the way, they pass through the *Valley of Baka*. Their very presence brings life-giving water to the area in the form of springs and rains. The Valley of Baka is not otherwise attested, and it is possibly mentioned here because 'Baka' means 'weeping', and as they move through the Valley of Weeping, it turns fertile as they near the holy place.^[119] Indeed, the closer they get, the stronger they become (*they go from strength to strength*), until they finally arrive at the sanctuary.

The psalmist's desire to be in God's presence at the temple leads him to envy the birds (*sparrow/swallow*, v. 3) who have made their nest and raised their young near the altar of the temple. They dwell in God's house, after all, and that is what he wants to do, engaged in unending worship. Of course, no-one lived in the temple itself, but he pronounces those blessed who go there so often that it is almost as if they live there.

84:8–9. Care for the king

The psalmist turns from yearning to petition as he asks God to protect and care for (implied by *look on*) the king (*your anointed one*). The king is the protector of his people (*our shield*), but his real strength is found in God's favour.

84:10–12. Better one day in the temple

Although the psalmist expresses the desire to dwell in the temple, he believes that a single day in the courts of the temple area would surpass a thousand days anywhere else. After all, a day in the temple is a day in the presence of God. He has chosen to follow God and would rather be on the outer edges of the temple (as a *doorkeeper*) than live in a tent belonging to the wicked. God, after all, is the provider of life and illumination (*sun*) and a protection from threats (*shield*). He gives all good things to those who follow him obediently, as the opening of Psalm 23 also asserts ('The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing'). The psalm concludes with a blessing on those who trust God and thus encourages utter confidence in him.

Meaning

God chose Zion as the place to make his presence known among his people, so Solomon built the temple there. Thus, that place and that building were holy, or set apart from all other places, because of God's presence. To be in Zion is to be close to God and his benefits.

The New Testament announces that God makes his presence known in Jesus Christ: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1:14). God sent his Spirit to dwell in us so that we, as individuals (1 Cor. 6:19–20) and as a church (Eph. 2:19–22), are called the temple of God.

Psalm 85. Righteousness and peace kiss each other

Context

The first stanza of Psalm 85 looks to the past and God's redemptive work in the community's life, while the second stanza shifts to a plea for God to restore them in the future. The psalmist locates the cause of their suffering in the community's sin and God's punishment. Psalm 126 has a similar shape, and there we argue that the past restoration is a reference to the return from Babylonian exile, and the plea for help comes from the post-exilic community. Perhaps the same setting is in the background of Psalm 85. While it is appropriate to identify this psalm as a community lament, the fourth and final stanza does end on a note of confidence in God's covenantal favour.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

85:1–3. You restored our fortunes

In what might be a reference to the return from Babylonian exile, the psalmist acknowledges and thereby worships God for restoring the fortunes of his people Israel. The phrase *restored the fortunes* is a translation of a verb and its cognate nominative, whose basic root (*šûb*) means to 'turn' or 'return'. It appears about twenty-five times in the Old Testament in contexts that indicate a change of fortune for an individual or a community (e.g. Job 42:10; Jer. 32:44). Indeed, the root *šûb* occurs a number of times in this psalm and thus accentuates restoration as the major theme. By restoring their fortunes, God makes it clear that he has forgiven his people of the sins that led to his anger against them and their subsequent punishment.

85:4–7. Restore our fortunes again!

Something has happened between the previous restoration and the present of the psalm. The people need restoration once again (see *Context*), and the psalmist calls on God to turn from his anger and show them his *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *hesed*, a trait connected to God's covenant with Israel). In Psalm 79:5, the psalmist also asks, 'Will you be angry for ever?' There it is preceded by another question, namely 'How long?', which may well be implied here. The phrase

indicates that the sufferer has been long in his pain and sees no terminus in sight. He thus appeals to God's pity, suggesting that perhaps 'enough is enough'.

85:8–9. *His salvation is near*

The psalmist reports a divine oracle. God *promises peace* (the requested restoration), but only if they *fear God* and do not turn to folly. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7), and its opposite is folly, which at its heart is a turn away from God to false gods, represented by Woman Folly in Proverbs 9:13–18 (Longman 2006: 220–221). Fear is the proper emotion because it indicates that someone understands their subordinate status before God, and it puts that person in a position of humility, ready to listen and obey God. If the proper attitude is found among his people, God will let his *glory* dwell in the land. His glory is his manifest presence and is most closely connected with the temple (Longman 2010: 47–78).

85:10–13. *Confident in his covenantal faithfulness*

The psalmist ends with a powerful reflection on God's covenant with his people, personifying the divine qualities that are promised in the covenant and displayed in his relationship with his people. *Love* (translated 'unfailing love' [*hesed*] in v. 7) is the loyalty that the covenantal king demonstrates to his vassal people. *Faithfulness* affirms that God will indeed follow through on his promises. *Righteousness* indicates that God will act in accordance with his nature, and the harmony of *peace* is the result (a blessing of the covenant; Lev. 26:6–8). Verse 10 presents the touching picture of these four qualities coming together in an intimate embrace in the person of God. Verse 11 continues to personify faithfulness and righteousness, but this time in combination with a word pair (*heaven* and *earth*) to indicate that these qualities permeated the entire cosmos.^[120] Verse 12 names yet another product of the covenant: *good* (*tôb*), which God promises to give to his people. Verse 12b specifies the good as abundant crops (*our land will yield its harvest*), something promised in the blessings of the covenant (Lev. 26:3–5; Deut. 28:4, 8, 11). The final verse once again speaks of God's righteousness by personifying this divine quality as a herald preparing the way for the king who follows.

Meaning

Thus, as in Psalm 126, the psalmist turns to God to ask for restoration, with a vivid memory of a previous restoration from a crisis initiated by the community's sin. The psalm ends with a moving reflection on God's covenantal

character. He is loving, faithful and righteous, and he bestows benefits on his obedient people (peace; good, specifically crops).

Christians look back on God's great act of redemption on the cross that has been applied to their own broken lives. However, like the psalmist, we continue to struggle and experience trouble, sometimes brought on by our own sin. Like the psalmist, we can turn to God and seek his help. We also know Jesus who, as God incarnate, is a perfect expression of divine love, faithfulness and righteousness. In Jesus, these qualities meet.

Psalm 86. When I am in distress, I call to you

Context

In this individual lament, the psalmist appeals to God for help against those who oppress him. The problem takes concrete shape only at the end of the psalm and is preceded by phrases and vocabulary found in a number of different laments. The psalmist, while in need and calling for aid, nonetheless exhibits a certain faith in God's compassion, strength and willingness to help. Still, at the end he waits for a sign that God will answer his prayer and be good to him.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

86:1–7. *I am poor and needy*

The psalmist begins with an appeal for God to hear his prayer and respond by helping him in his troubles. He describes his condition as *poor and needy*, a common description in the Psalms of those who require God's help (Pss 35:10; 37:14; 40:17; 70:5; 74:21; 109:16, 22; 113:7). After all, God 'raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap' (Ps. 113:7). The psalmist is not only poor and needy, but also *faithful*, a word (*ḥāsîd*) that is related to the noun for 'unfailing love' (*ḥesed*) which denotes loyalty. The psalmist is loyal to God and his covenant. Thus, his reminder to God that he is his God (v. 2) is the basis on which he asks God to *guard* him and to bring him joy.

The psalmist places his hope in the nature of God. Not only is the psalmist characterized as having *ḥesed*, but so is God, who is abounding in it (v. 5), at least to his own people. God is also *forgiving*, which may imply that the psalmist feels that he is culpable for his affliction in some measure at least.

86:8–10. *All the nations will worship God*

The psalmist turns to God for help, because God is incomparable in his nature and mighty acts. The opening proclamation (*Among the gods there is none like you*) names God as unparalleled among the gods. The statement presumes the existence of other gods (as does Exod. 12:12; Ps. 82, and elsewhere). These gods are not God's equal, but rather they are other spiritual powers that he himself created (also called angels and demons). God has made the nations and they will

worship him. Indeed, according to Deuteronomy 32:8, God has assigned the nations to his angelic servants (the ‘sons of God’; see NIV footnote). Even though there are other ‘gods’, the psalmist relativizes their status by his assertion: *you alone are God*.

86:11–13. *Teach me and I will praise you*

Using the language of wisdom literature, the psalmist asks God to teach him his way so that he can *fear* God. The book of Proverbs, starting at 1:7, repeatedly urges the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom and encourages the son to stay on the right path, the path of the Lord. The psalmist does not want to be distracted or double-minded in his allegiance to God, but rather asks for a heart that is *undivided* in its devotion to God. God, after all, has saved him from death, and the psalmist responds with praise.

86:14–17. *Have mercy on me*

Even so, the psalmist has a pressing need on account of the attack of violent enemies who want to kill him and are indifferent to God. Thus, he asks God to save him from these enemies. He appeals to the service he renders God, a service that follows his mother’s example. Even more fundamentally, the psalmist appeals to God’s nature as One who is *compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love* (covenant loyalty; *hesed*) and *faithfulness*. These are all divine qualities promised to God’s people by the covenant they share. God revealed himself by these characteristics in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf when he provided new copies of the Ten Commandments to Moses (Exod. 34:4–7; see also 2 Chr. 30:9; Neh. 9:17; Pss 103:8; 111:4; 145:8; Joel 2:13). At present, the psalmist looks for a sign that God will be good to him and shame his enemies.

Meaning

The psalmist, *poor and needy*, is under duress from oppressive foes and calls on God for help. While Psalm 86 seems on the surface to be a pastiche of phrases and terms from other psalms of lament, verses 8–10 have special interest, showing that ‘the singer sees the LORD’s salvific power in a universal and eschatological light’ (Kraus 1993: 183). The psalmist anticipates the day when all the nations will come and worship the Lord, who is the only God.

Christians believe that the promise of this psalm has begun to be fulfilled, but has not yet reached completion. Jesus has drawn followers from many nations, but still the full realization of the psalmist’s vision has not yet come to pass.

Interestingly, the book of Revelation envisions those who have been victorious over the beast singing a song that includes a reference to verse 9 of our psalm, indicating that this full realization comes with the second advent of Christ:

Great and marvellous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the nations.
Who will not fear you, Lord,
and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.
(Rev. 15:3–4)

Psalm 87. Glorious things are said

Context

The psalmist praises God by recounting the glorious things spoken about *Zion*, the place where God makes his presence known in the world (for other Zion hymns, see Pss 46, 48, 76, 84, 122, 137). The psalmist foresees the day when not only Israel, but all the nations of the world, will find their spiritual home in Zion.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

87:1–2. *The city on the mountain*

The psalmist immediately turns our attention to *Zion*, the mountain made holy by God's presence dwelling in the temple that was built there. While Jerusalem, the city associated with Zion, was constructed well before the Israelites under David took it (2 Sam. 5:6–10), God founded Jerusalem spiritually when he directed Solomon to build the temple there. God chose to dwell in Zion, and it is his very presence there that accounts for his preference for Zion over all other dwellings in Israel, not that he does not also love them.

87:3–7. *The register of the peoples*

Glorious things are said of Jerusalem (personified and addressed in the second person), the *city of God* where Zion was located, because God chose to make his presence known there. True, God is omnipresent, but he did choose to make his presence palpable in a special way in Jerusalem.

The rest of the psalm (vv. 4–7) is a divine pronouncement, in which God incorporates foreign nations into the holy city. Such a vision of the nations in the holy city is a future-oriented one (see Ps. 86:8–10). God speaks of how those nations will be treated as if they were born in Zion. God's recording of the names in the register of the peoples may have the idea of the 'book of life' behind it. The other Old Testament reference is found in Psalm 69:28, where the psalmist asks God to remove his enemies from the book of life, in short, asking God to bring about their deaths (see commentary). The book may be thought to include the righteous who would be permitted to participate in the worship of God (see Exod. 32:32; Pss 40:7; 56:8; 69:27–28; 109:13–15; Isa. 4:3; 56:5;

Ezek. 13:9; Mal. 3:16–18).

He begins with the two most powerful nations, Egypt and *Babylon*, the superpowers at the two poles of the Ancient Near East. Egypt is here called *Rahab*, the name of a mythological sea monster (Job 9:13; 26:12; Ps. 89:10; Isa. 51:9) that for reasons unknown became associated with Egypt (see also Isa. 51:9), perhaps because Rahab was a chaos monster and Egypt from an Israelite perspective fomented chaos. God goes on to name other traditional enemies of Israel and looks to the future when they will be counted as native to Jerusalem. The list begins with *Philistia*, an internal enemy that harassed Israel through the time of David, and continues with *Tyre*, the important commercial city-state to the north of Israel, and *Cush*, an ancient name for what today is Ethiopia, Eritrea and parts of Sudan. Verses 5 and 6 seem to extend the list beyond those named. All the foreign nations will be considered native to Jerusalem (*Zion*). They will be (metaphorically) born there, which is probably a reference to a spiritual birth. The psalmist imagines the assembled nations singing to God in worship and proclaiming that their very source of life (*fountains*) was found in Zion because that is the place where God has made his presence known.

Meaning

The psalm celebrates *Zion*, the location of the temple, the place where God makes his glorious presence known in the world. During the period of the Old Testament, the foreign nations were enemies, but the psalm looks to the future when peoples from the nations will find their spiritual home in Zion.

In the New Testament, God makes his presence known through Jesus, and the nations are invited to participate in the good news and enter into a relationship with God through him. We are perhaps to hear an echo of our psalm in Paul's figurative contrast between enslavement to the law of Sinai and the freedom won by the gospel, represented by 'the Jerusalem that is above...and she is our mother' (Gal. 4:26). Paul may also have Psalm 87 in the back of his mind when he reminds his Philippian readers that 'our citizenship is in heaven' (Phil. 3:20). But most significantly, in the light of our psalm, we think of that future day in the new Jerusalem when 'the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it' (Rev. 21:26).

Psalm 88. Darkness is my closest friend

Context

Psalm 88 is an individual lament prayed by a person who has been ill for a long time and is friendless and near to death. The psalmist has almost given up on God, but not completely. He still prays and hopes that he will indeed be saved from his predicament. While most laments end with a note of confidence or praise, this psalm ends in darkness. Nonetheless, by virtue of the fact that he is still speaking to God, he maintains hope that perhaps this time God will hear.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

88:1–2. *The God who saves me*

This dark psalm begins with an appeal to *the God who saves me*. As we read on, we realize that this salvation has not yet happened – far from it. However, the opening indicates that this prayer is not one of complete despair. The psalmist still turns to God for help and continues to believe that God is the only One who can help him. Thus, his prayer is continual (*day and night*), asking God for aid in the midst of his wretched condition.

88:3–5. *Overwhelmed with troubles*

The psalmist's complaint is like none other in the psalms, but is reminiscent of Job. In short, he is dying. The language suggests that he has 'one foot in the grave'. His troubles certainly include illness and probably extend beyond that. He is 'as good as dead' (*I am counted among those who go down to the pit*). During much of the Old Testament period, God's people did not have an idea of the afterlife, and the psalmist believes that death is the end of it all. God will forget him, as the dead are beyond his care.

88:6–12. *You, God, have ruined my life*

In the previous stanza, the psalmist bemoaned his present condition. In this one, he charges God with making his life so miserable. God is the One who has brought him near death (*You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths*). God is the One who has filled his life with trouble, the overwhelming waves

standing for the forces of chaos and even evil. Friends can bring comfort in the midst of trouble, but God has made his friends feel only revulsion.

Nonetheless, even though God is held responsible for his present predicament, the psalmist realizes that only God can change it as well. Thus, he keeps praying. The series of questions in verses 10–12 almost taunt God to provoke him to action. The questions are based on the belief that death is the end of everything; there is no afterlife (see also Pss 6:5; 30:9). So why wouldn't God want to heal him in order to receive his continuing praise?

88:13–14. Why do you reject me?

This is not the first time the psalmist has turned to God for help. He starts anew every morning. His burning question is *why?* Why has God withdrawn his presence from the psalmist (*hide your face from me*)? It feels as if God has rejected him, and perhaps he has, but the psalmist does not have a clue as to the reason. Once again the psalms encourage a brutal honesty with God.

88:15–18. Darkness is my closest friend

Affliction is not a new experience for the psalmist, for it has characterized his life from his youth. He has been in despair for most, if not all, of his life. He identifies the cause as God's wrath, but still, never admitting sin, he does not know why he is the object of God's anger. God's terrors, which include life-threatening illness and perhaps more, have surrounded and engulfed him like a flood. The waters, and particularly the unruly waters of a flood, represent chaos.

No psalm ends on a more dismal note than this one. Most laments end with an expression of confidence or even praise. However, this psalm closes with the bleak statement that the psalmist has no friends. Perhaps, like Job, friends have deserted him because to them his suffering signals that he is a sinner. Whatever the reason, there is no friend except darkness.

Meaning

Psalm 88 is one of the bleakest of all the prayers in the book, but still it is a prayer, and, unlike the grumblers in the wilderness, the psalmist continues to turn to God to voice his anguish and call for aid. Psalm 88 is the model prayer for those whose previous prayers have met with silence from God.

From a New Testament perspective, it is obvious that the composer of Psalm 88 speaks from a context with little awareness of the afterlife, a truth that God reveals over time and only robustly in the New Testament. Even so, just because God's people know that a wonderful future awaits them does not mean that they

don't face death with fear and trembling. Thus, Psalm 88 remains a prayer for those whose prayers have remained unanswered, but who still hope that God will act on their behalf. It is the kind of prayer that Jesus could have prayed in his darkest moments in the Garden of Gethsemane, although that moment gave way to his utter surrender to the will of God.

Psalm 89. Where is your former great love?

Context

Psalm 89 has two distinct sections, judging by the tone of the psalmist. The long opening (vv. 1–37) celebrates God’s covenant loyalty and faithfulness, particularly in regard to the covenant with David that promised him an eternal dynasty (2 Sam. 7:4–17; 1 Chr. 17:1–15). In verse 38, there is a radical shift, as the speaker accuses God of breaking the covenant by allowing Israel’s enemies to defeat them and to shame the Davidic king. What looks like a royal hymn changes quickly and definitively into a community lament. These are not two different poems awkwardly brought together. The first part is preparing a basis for the complaint. God promised to be a Father to Israel’s king, but he has violated that covenant.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

89:1–4. God’s promise to David

A hymnic opening praises God’s *great love* (*hesed*; or loyalty) and *faithfulness*, virtues both connected to the covenant between God and Israel. Indeed, the psalmist asserts that Israel’s love and faithfulness last forever, although soon we will see that he questions this fact. Verses 3–4 draw attention to the particular covenant at issue in the psalm, namely the covenant with David (2 Sam. 7) in which God promises David a dynasty that will last forever.

89:5–8. The heavens praise God

The composer praises God’s unparalleled greatness. Indeed, the *heavens* themselves worship God. Unlike Psalm 19, ‘heavens’ refer to the inhabitants of the heavens, here called *holy ones* and *heavenly beings*. The reference is to the divine assembly composed of other ‘gods’ (see Ps. 82) or, in language with which we are more familiar, ‘angels’. When Isaiah was called to his prophetic ministry, he was brought into such a heavenly scene (Isa. 6).

89:9–13. God is sovereign over heaven and earth

God also controls and defeats those spiritual powers that challenge him. The

surging sea and its waves represent the forces of chaos, even evil. *Rahab*, here used in its mythological sense as a sea monster (see commentary at Ps. 87:4), does not stand a chance before the power of God.

Through the use of poles that represent everything in between^[121] (*heavens* and *earth*; *north* and *south*), the psalmist asserts not only that God created everything (*founded/created*), but that everything depends on him.

While water represents chaos, mountains signify stability and grandeur. Here the two most prominent mountains in Israel (from a geological standpoint), *Tabor*^[122] and *Hermon*,^[123] worship God because of his great power, revealed particularly in his military actions (represented by reference to God's *right hand*).^[124]

89:14–18. God our King

The psalmist again emphasizes God's covenant relationship with his people by speaking of those qualities that God the King has promised to demonstrate to his vassal people. God's *throne* is founded on the principles of *righteousness* and *justice*. God will treat people as they deserve. His vanguard include the qualities of *love* (or *loyalty*; *hesed*) and *faithfulness*. These will become the basis for questioning God's present treatment of his people, as described in the last part of the psalm (see below). Accordingly, those who praise God and live in an intimate and obedient relationship with him (*walk in the light of your presence*) will be *blessed*, not cursed. Blessing means not only to have a harmonious relationship with God and other people, but to enjoy an Eden-like existence, with every need satisfied (see the blessings of the covenant in Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 28:1–14).

God is the strength of Israel and thus he brings dignity and power to his people (*you exalt our horn*; perhaps an allusion to Hannah's song [1 Sam. 2:1]). Verse 18 concludes with special attention to the human king. God is Israel's heavenly King, but there is also a human king who should serve as God's vice-regent among his people. The human king is called Israel's *shield* in verse 18a, an acknowledgment that the nation's security depends on him.

89:19–29. David my servant

The psalmist then recounts God's past choice of *David* as king. The story may be found in 1 Samuel 16, where God commissions his prophet Samuel to go to Bethlehem to anoint a son of Jesse. While Saul was a head taller than everyone else, David was not fully grown, at least at the time of his anointing, but God told Samuel, 'People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the

heart' (1 Sam. 16:7). Samuel, on behalf of God, anointed David (1 Sam. 16:13) with the *sacred oil* that indicated his endowment with the Spirit of God for the task that lay before him. Through God's enablement, this *young man* became a fearsome warrior whom God used to complete the conquest by defeating the Philistines. His power (*horn*) was exalted, and he, on God's behalf, controlled the powers of chaos and evil (represented by the *sea/rivers* of v. 25).

David had a special relationship with God, one characterized as that of a *Father* with his *son* ('I will be his father, and he shall be my son' [2 Sam. 7:14; cf. Ps. 2:7]). While all Israelites could be called the sons of God, David the king was the *firstborn*. This relationship was formalized as a covenant, whereby God promised to secure not only David's rule, but also that of his sons ('Your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever' [2 Sam. 7:16]).

89:30–37. *His line will continue forever*

As we will observe in the next stanza, the psalmist is laying the foundation of an argument. In the previous stanza, he has reminded God of his commitment to David. Now he is going to show his awareness of the conditional nature of God's relationship with David and his sons. They do not have *carte blanche* to behave as they wish. He will discipline them if they wander away from God. Here he reflects on 2 Samuel 7:14b: 'When he [David or his descendant] does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands.' That said, God also goes on to say that he will not treat David as he did Saul, meaning that he would never remove the kingship from David's line. It would be eternal. To remove the kingship from David's line would be to violate the covenant (v. 34a). Like the *moon*, David's line will last forever.

89:38–45. *You have renounced the covenant*

Up to this point, the psalmist has emphasized God's covenant loyalty and faithfulness. He has focused on the Davidic covenant with its promises of an eternal dynasty. Granted, God will discipline a wayward descendant of David, but he would never end the line.

The remainder of the psalm takes on a radically different tone as it accuses God of violating the covenant. While God promised to exalt the king, he has *defiled his crown* in the dust. The evidence is obvious. Israel's enemies have the upper hand. They have broken down the defensive walls of the cities and have destroyed Israel's strongholds. Israel's armies are on the retreat. Rather than exalting the king, he has shamed him.

89:46–51. *How long, Lord?*

Thus, the psalm ends with an appeal to God to change his attitude and actions towards his people and come to their rescue. The psalmist begins by asking *How long?* – a question found in a number of prayers (6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84). The phrase indicates that the sufferer has been long in his pain and sees no terminus in sight. He thus appeals to God's pity, suggesting that perhaps 'enough is enough'. The question also presumes that the onus is on God, not on Israel. In other words, the psalmist does not acknowledge any sin on Israel's part that would account for God's action (Ps. 44 may provide another example). Thus, he feels that there is a fundamental issue of fairness here.

In addition, the psalmist appeals to God's compassion by referring to the fragility and transience of human existence (vv. 47–48). Furthermore, he tries to move God to pity as he recalls the way the enemy nations have treated his people (*your servant has been mocked*) and in particular his anointed king.

89:52. *Doxology to Book 3*

Verse 13 is a doxology that does not end Psalm 41, but rather the entirety of Book I of the Psalter (see Introduction, p. 36).

Meaning

We do not actually know how God responded to this prayer that charges him with breaking the Davidic covenant, although it is surely premature to think that it signals the end of the Davidic monarchy. We are not sure when the psalm was composed, except that it was written in response to a military emergency when the enemy had the upper hand. God could at least have answered the original psalmist's plea by restoring their fortunes. However, from the historical books, we do know that the Davidic dynasty eventually came to an end when Nebuchadnezzar deposed Zechariah, thus appearing to belie God's promises to David.

However, the faithful did not give up on God, but rather realized that there was a deeper meaning to the promise. We see this as the prophets speak of a future Davidic messiah. For example, Jeremiah proclaimed:

'The days are coming,' declares the LORD,
'when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,
a King who will reign wisely
and do what is just and right in the land.
In his days Judah will be saved
and Israel will live in safety.

This is the name by which he will be called:

The LORD our Righteous Saviour.'

(Jer. 23: 5–6)

The Christian knows the New Testament claim that Jesus is that future Son of David who rules as King (Messiah) forever (Luke 1:32; Acts 13:22–23). He is the Davidic descendant who rules as King from his heavenly throne forever (Longman 2007: 13–34).

BOOK 4: PSALMS 90 – 106

Psalm 90. Establish the work of our hands

Context

The psalmist speaks on behalf of the community, beginning with a profound reflection on God's longstanding protection (vv. 1–2). He continues with a general statement about human mortality (vv. 3–6), but the psalm then quickly develops into a fearful response to God's wrath directed at the community's sin that has led to its suffering and short life. Finally, the psalm concludes with a call for God to relieve their misery and bring them to a good place.

When the psalm opens, it looks as if it might be a wisdom reflection on the fragility of human life. The hope that God might teach them in such a way that they would gain a wise heart (v. 12) also demonstrates that the psalm arises from a wisdom context. However, the description of the community's suffering and the desperate call for help reveal that it is a lament of the community. As is typical, no specific problem or historical situation is mentioned as the cause of affliction. Thus, the psalm could be used by later worshippers in a variety of similar, though not necessarily identical, situations.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

90:1–2. Our dwelling-place

The psalmist appears to begin on a confident note by confessing that God has been his people's (*our*) resting place from time immemorial (*throughout all generations*). The term *dwelling-place* (*mā'ôn*) is used of animal dens (Job 37:8; 38:40; Ps. 104:22; Nah. 2:11, 12), suggesting a place remote from human habitation. It is also used, as here, to refer to God's dwelling (heaven: Deut. 26:15; 2 Chr. 30:27; Jer. 25:30; or perhaps the sanctuary that represents heaven on earth: 1 Sam. 2:29; Ps. 76:2). As such, it is often a refuge from enemies (Ps. 71:3; 91:9; *NIDOTTE* 2: 1015–1016). God has always been there, even before humanity, indeed before the earth was birthed by him.

90:3–6. *Fragility of life*

God is God from everlasting to everlasting (v. 2), but humans are fragile and temporary. Created from the *dust* (Gen. 2:7), we return to the dust at God's command. While forty plus generations of humans would live and die in a period of a *thousand years*, it is but a moment to him. On the other hand, humans are like *grass* under the dry, hot sun of Palestine. New growth in the morning shrivels and is dead by evening. So, humanity lives a short, fragile life (see also Pss 102:4, 11; 103:15; 129:6; Isa. 51:12). Verse 5a is problematic, and the text is probably disturbed. As it stands, it simply says, 'you sweep sleep'. The NIV's attempt to give it meaning is speculative.

90:7–12. *A heart of wisdom*

After making a general statement about human mortality, the psalmist expresses his fear, as he connects his community's misery and short lives to the anger of God. God does not forget their sins; he knows them all, even the *secret* ones,¹²⁵ thus explaining his anger. Life is difficult (*the best [of our days] are but trouble and sorrow*) and short (*they quickly pass, and we fly away*). In a nice use of numerical parallelism, the psalmist considers seventy or even eighty years of life to be short. His concerns here about misery and brevity are shared by Job. Note how he expresses very similar ideas, but using different words and images (the brevity and fragility of life is like a breath, rather than like grass [v. 6], for instance; see Job 7:1–10).

Interestingly, the psalmist's first request is not to forestall death or remove misery, but rather to become self-aware. He does not want to live as though he is going to live forever, but rather in the knowledge of his mortality. Why? To have a *heart of wisdom*. Wisdom is the ability to live life in an authentic way. A wise person knows how to make the right choices at the right time.

90:13–17. *Relent, Lord*

While the psalmist's first request was to live with wisdom, he now turns to God and urgently requests relief from his community's suffering. He wants God to *relent* or turn back from causing his people to suffer for their sins and to take them away from their present misery to a place of joy. Only God can cause our work to come to fruition, and the psalmist closes with an appeal to make that happen.

Meaning

The psalmist bemoans the fact that God gives human beings short, miserable

lives, but he understands that this is a result of God's judgment on sin. He turns to God to ask him to change his attitude towards the community and to give them joy where now they experience affliction.

Life is short and hard, and death comes at the end. The message of the gospel, though, is that, thanks to Jesus, that is not the end of the story. Jesus has died on the cross on our behalf, and for that reason we have hope for life after death and even joy in the present.

Psalm 91. Under his wings

Context

The psalmist, presumably a priest, assures the congregation that God is with them and will protect them from trouble. The trouble appears to be military, and so the congregation is likely the army, who face dangers in battle as well as from disease in the war camp. Thus, it is a psalm of confidence, but there are also similarities with wisdom thought, particularly in the idea that no harm will come to those who have a proper relationship with God.¹²⁶

Comment

91:1–2. *My protection*

Metaphors of protection pervade the opening stanza. God provides rest because he is a *shelter* (Pss 27:5; 31:21; 32:7; 61:4) and a *shadow* (Ps. 121:5; Isa. 16:3) for this people. The names for God (*Most High/Almighty*) connote the strength and position to provide this protection. Verse 2 introduces military metaphors of protection (*refuge/fortress*) appropriate for this song of confidence that found its original setting in the context of warfare (Pss 31:3–4; 71:3; 144:2).

91:3–8. *God will save you*

On the basis of God's power and protection, the psalmist now assures the army/congregation that God can save them in their present predicament, which is described metaphorically as a *snare* placed in their way. Here they are like a bird threatened by a *fowler*. The third colon of verse 3 then mentions another apparently non-metaphorical threat, a *deadly pestilence*. He also refers to this pestilence in verse 6. The pair *darkness* (or in parallel with midday may specifically indicate midnight) and *midday* constitute a merism that means 'all the time'. Apparently, the people of God are threatened by disease, a not uncommon danger to ancient war camps. The psalmist thus assures the congregation that God will not let disease overwhelm them, nor will he allow the battle to destroy them. They are threatened at *night* in the camp and during the *day* in battle (v. 5). People will die in the battle, but not the faithful, only the wicked (vv. 7–8). After all, God will indeed protect them. Verse 4 provides the striking image of God covering and protecting his people with his feathered

wings (see also Pss 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7). To most, this suggests the image of a bird shielding its young with its wings ¹²⁷ or perhaps driving away potential threats from its young with the rapid beating of its wings. However, it is also possible that there is a polemical function to this image and that the comparison is with winged deities of the Ancient Near East. Perhaps both are brought to mind, since the winged deities themselves are bird-like.¹²⁸

91:9–13. *No harm will overtake you*

The psalmist then assures the army/congregation that if they affirm that God is their *refuge* (see v. 2) and do indeed make him their *dwelling* (*mā'ôn*; see commentary at 90:1–2), then they will be spared harm (v. 10). God will charge his angels to protect his people. They will avoid minor injuries (*strike your foot against a stone*) as well as major dangers, as represented by threatening wild animals. They will not only survive the threat of the *lion*, *cobra*, *great lion* and *serpent* (or possibly 'sea monster', since *tannîm* is associated with Leviathan in Ps. 74:13–14 and Isa. 27:1), but they will dominate them (*tread/trample*).

91:14–16. 'I will rescue him'

The psalm ends with an oracle from the Lord in which he assures the one who loves him that he will protect him. The psalm addresses people who are in harm's way, and God tells them that they will be protected and will survive to live a *long life*. Jacobson and Jacobson rightly explain this psalm thus: 'Rather than offering naïve promises that force a person to deny life's threats, they are expression of trust as the psalmists face life's dangers crucially and at the same time rely on the presence of the divine' (Jacobson and Jacobson 2013: 56).

Meaning

The psalm is a song of confidence in which a priest assures the army/congregation of God's presence and protection as they face dangers in the midst of battle. The assurance that God will protect the hearers from all harm seems overly optimistic, but one must remember that the testimony of the Old Testament was that God was a Warrior who fought with his people (Longman and Reid, 1995).

The devil quotes verses 11–12 of the psalm to Jesus in the second temptation (Matt. 4:6). He tells Jesus to throw himself off the highest point of the temple, assuring him that God's angels will catch him and keep him safe. Jesus does not succumb to the temptation, but rather quotes Deuteronomy 6:16: 'Do not put the LORD your God to the test.' Israel gave in to the temptations in the wilderness,

but Jesus resisted them, showing that he is the true Son of God, the true Israel.

Christians can pray Psalm 91, knowing that God is with them in the spiritual battle of this life and that, in Christ, God will give them eternal life.

Psalm 92. Like a palm tree

Context

The psalmist praises God for routing his enemies and establishing him as a righteous person, like a palm or cedar tree. Reference to the defeat of his enemies, who are also God's enemies, suggests that this song is a thanksgiving psalm, but we should also acknowledge the presence of wisdom categories in the psalm (vv. 6–7). Like Psalm 1, it presents a picture of the righteous, comparing them to a fertile tree (vv. 12–14).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

92:1–3. Praise God

The psalmist encourages the people of God to worship the Lord by pointing out how *good* it is to praise him. It is good because it is right, since praise is fitting to God, whose nature and actions call for it. His *love* (or covenant loyalty; *hesed*) and his *faithfulness* to his relationship with his people are the grounds on which they worship him. It is good because it feels right, since we were created to praise him. The psalmist envisions this praise accompanied by instrumental music, as it surely was in the sanctuary.

92:4–7. Great are your works

God's love and faithfulness (v. 2) issue forth in *deeds*. While no specific deeds are mentioned here, the narrative of the Old Testament is full of accounts of God saving his people, perhaps nowhere more dramatically than at the sea (Exod. 14 – 15). Not only are God's works great, but so are his *thoughts*. *Fools* neither recognize God's great deeds, nor understand his profound thoughts. They may have temporary success and life (like *grass* springing up to life), but (also like grass) they will soon be destroyed (see 90:3–6 for the association of grass with the fragility of human life).

92:8–11. Defeated enemies

God's exaltation (v. 8) is causally linked to the undermining of his *enemies* (vv. 8–9). God's enemies are also the psalmist's enemies (v. 11). God is great, and

those who resist him do not stand a chance. As God puts down his enemies, his people, including the psalmist, are exalted with God. *Horn* represents strength and vitality. The psalmist will grow in strength and will experience refreshment. *Oils* were used in the hot, dry climate of ancient Israel to moisturize the skin (Pss 23:5; 45:7; Prov. 27:9; Isa. 61:3).

92:12–15. Planted in the house of the Lord

Psalm 1 likened the righteous person to a tree planted by streams of water (1:3). Here, the psalmist compares the righteous person to a tree again, this time specifying the *palm* and the *cedar*. The palm tree grows in the well-watered oasis and produces dates, and thus is a symbol of life and fertility. The cedar is a large and stately tree. Both trees represent the righteous and contrast dramatically with the wicked, who are like the grass. Interestingly, both the palm and the cedar were represented in the temple: cedar was used as a construction material (1 Kgs 5), and the palm was represented in the iconography (1 Kgs 6:29, 32, 35; 7:36). Thus, it is significant that the righteous are compared to the palm and the cedar planted in the sanctuary area (v. 13). The idea is that the righteous flourish because they stay near the presence of God. They manifest their righteous attitude by affirming that God is God and he is their protection (*he is my Rock*; see 18:2 for ‘rock’).

Meaning

The psalmist, a righteous person, thanks God for saving him from his enemies, who are also God’s enemies. God’s deeds, as well as his profound thought, deserve praise. The righteous are like a stately and fertile tree, while the wicked are like short-lived grass.

Psalm 93. The Lord reigns

Context

With its opening phrase, *the LORD reigns (yhwh mālāk)*, Psalm 93 identifies itself as the first of a series of hymns proclaiming the Lord's kingship (see also Pss 95, 96, 97, 98, 99). These psalms, along with others (particularly Ps. 47), were at the heart of Mowinckel's attempt to create a single setting for the book of Psalms in an annual New Year's festival that reasserted Yahweh's kingship over his people and the world (Mowinckel, 1921–24, 1962). While few would agree with Mowinckel's speculative reconstruction of such a festival, these psalms do express faithful Israel's deep-seated belief in the sovereignty and rule of the Lord.

Comment

93:1–2. *The Lord reigns*

The psalmist proclaims God as King of the world. He is not proclaiming him as King for the first time. Far from it. He has been King *from all eternity*. There never was a time when God was not sovereign ruler of the universe. Human kings are dressed in fine ornamental clothing, but God's robes are his *majesty*. Human kings carry ornamental maces called sceptres and go to battle using sword and spear, but God's weapon is his *strength*. As a result of God's kingship, the world is stable (*established, firm and secure*).

93:3–5. *Mightier than the seas*

Ancient Near Eastern myth pitted the God of creation against the forces of chaos, represented by the God of the sea. In Babylon, Marduk established his kingship when he defeated Tiamat and created the world and established its order from her carcass (*Enuma Elish*; Jacobsen, 1987). Closer to Israel's home, the Ugaritic myths tell essentially the same story with different characters when Baal becomes king by defeating Yam (the sea god). Utilizing this mythic theme, the second stanza describes how God is mightier than the waters of chaos (see also Ps. 46). The seas represent the threatening forces of chaos, but God is mightier, and can defeat and control the sea. It is he, not Marduk or Baal, who is King and can accomplish this great act (Kloos, 1986; Wakeman, 1973; Day,

1975; Curtis, 1978).

93:5. *Your statutes stand firm*

Kings published laws for their people to obey, so as to provide social order and subdue those who wanted to disrupt the community. God's law (his *statutes*; the Ten Commandments and the case law; e.g. Exod. 20 – 23) stands firm, in the sense that it was binding on the people and guided them in ways that would enhance their life. God's *house* (the sanctuary) was holy, because God made his presence known on earth at that location.

Meaning

The psalmist celebrates what the Bible teaches throughout its pages, namely, the kingship of God. He describes how the King orders his kingdom by quelling the forces of chaos, represented by the *great waters*. The concluding verse mentions God's law, which is a prime way of subduing the forces of chaos.

Christians celebrate God's kingship in the person of Jesus, the 'anointed king' (Messiah) who has come to establish God's kingdom. When he stilled the waves and walked on the water (Matt. 8:23–27; Mark 6:45–56; John 6:16–24), he showed that he is the God who controls the forces of chaos.

Psalm 94. A God who avenges

Context

The psalmist laments the oppression of the righteous and the vulnerable by the wicked and calls on God to avenge their crimes. He proclaims that God is the Judge of the earth, but the wicked foolishly believe that God does not know what they are doing. This lament uses wisdom ideas to characterize evil people as fools (vv. 8–11), and to confer a blessing on the righteous (vv. 12–15). The psalmist ends on a confident note that God will indeed repay the wicked for their evil deeds.

Comment

94:1–3. Judge of the earth

The psalmist begins with an urgent call for God to judge arrogant and proud evildoers. God is *Judge of the earth*, after all. He is the One who *avenges* the crimes of the wicked against the righteous. The wicked deserve punishment, so the psalmist calls God to *shine forth*, by which he means that God should make his glorious presence manifest. Apparently, God has not yet come, so the wicked have the upper hand. Thus, the psalmist asks *how long?* How long will the wicked be able to get away with their evil deeds? The question implies that enough is enough, and it is time for God to appear (see Ps. 13).

94:4–7. The wicked

The psalmist then lists the crimes of the wicked against God and God's vulnerable people. They oppress and kill even the most fragile members of society: the *widow*, the *foreigner* and the *fatherless*. They think God doesn't know what they are doing, or at least that he doesn't care. Not only do they carry out these atrocious deeds, but they also boast about it, exposing their pride. The psalmist appeals to God to move against them, because he knows that God is the One who 'upholds the cause of the oppressed...watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow' (Ps. 146:7a, 9ab; see also Ps. 68:5–6).

94:8–11. You fools

The psalmist now speaks directly to the wicked, whom he characterizes as *fools*

who lack wisdom (v. 8). The wise person ‘fears the LORD’ (Prov. 1:7; Job 28:28), but these people think God is not even aware of their evil activities. The psalmist ridicules them by asking a series of rhetorical questions. Of course the One who created the human ear and eye hears and sees what they are doing. Of course the One who disciplines nations will discipline these evil people. God not only sees what they are doing; he knows what they are going to do before they do it (*the LORD knows all human plans*). He is not concerned about their plans, because they will not succeed. Proverbs teaches that human plans are fruitless unless God approves them:

Many plans are in people’s hearts,
but the advice of Yahweh is what will succeed.
(Prov. 19:21; ¹²⁹ see also 16:1–3, 9, 33)

94:12–15. *Blessed are your people*

In good wisdom fashion, the psalmist confers a *blessing* on the righteous, here defined as those to whom God teaches his law and disciplines when they depart from it. Proverbs understands that the righteous wise are those who love God’s discipline:

My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline,
and do not resent his rebuke,
because the LORD disciplines those he loves,
as a father the son he delights in.
(3:11–12; see also 1:2; 12:1)

On the other hand, ‘fools despise wisdom and instruction’ (Prov. 1:7).

Those who listen to God’s correction will find relief, even in the midst of trouble (v. 13), but one day in the future, righteous judgment will again be established (v. 15) and the wicked will get what they deserve. They will fall into the pit.

94:16–19. *God helps me*

In verse 16, the psalmist issues a call for help against the wicked. He knows that One has already stepped forward, namely God, and that is why he still survives. If it were not for God’s *unfailing love* and *consolation* (both qualities of God promised in the covenant), he would have died. Indeed, whoever steps forward to help will fail unless God is supporting him:

Unless the LORD builds the house,
the builders labour in vain.
Unless the LORD watches over the city,
the guards stand watch in vain.

(Ps. 127:1)

94:20–23. *God is my fortress*

Verse 20 may identify the focus of the trouble besetting the righteous, including the psalmist – a *corrupt throne*, a king who rules for his own desires rather than for the good of the people. The book of Kings reveals that many of the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah would qualify as corrupt and evil. A corrupt throne would issue laws (*decrees*) that would bring misery rather than joy. Such laws would give opportunity to the wicked, while suppressing the righteous.

However, the psalmist does not end on a note of defeat, but rather of future victory. He knows that God is the One who protects him as his *fortress* and *rock* (see 18:2; 28:1–2), and that God will indeed ensure that the wicked receive justice.

Meaning

The psalm laments the depredations of the wicked against the righteous and calls on God to execute his judgment for the sake of his people, particularly the vulnerable among them. The psalmist asks *how long* before God will act, for he certainly will act and judge those who oppress them.

In the book of Revelation (6:9–11), John describes how he saw ‘those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained’ crying out to God, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ In response, they are each given a white robe and told to wait a little longer. The little longer is until Jesus returns again and does judge the wicked and save his people.

Psalm 95. Do not harden your hearts

Context

Psalm 95 is the second (see Ps. 93) of a series of psalms that praise God as King (see also 96, 97, 98, 99) and celebrate the fact that he is the Creator and the Shepherd of his people. Interestingly, this hymn closes with a call to trust and obedience, appealing to the congregation to avoid the sin of the wilderness generation. This concluding call to obedience is a prophetic oracle from God himself, urging the congregation to follow him.

Comment

95:1–2. *Our Protector*

The psalmist invites the congregation to worship God with *music and song*. God is called the *Rock of our salvation*, rock being a common metaphor for protection (see 18:2; 28:1–2).

95:3–5. *Our great God*

The word *for* (*kî*) that opens the second stanza announces that the psalmist will give reasons for the congregation to worship God. He is their *great King*. The royal metaphor points to God's sovereign authority over all creation. He is *above all gods*. Such a statement probably assumes the existence of other gods (see commentary on Ps. 82), but these gods are not peers; they are subservient to the true God. God created all things, including the other gods, who are elsewhere referred to as 'angels' (or 'demons'). His greatness and his sovereign authority are the result of the fact that he created and controls all things, from the deepest point of the earth to the most exalted mountain peaks. *Depths* and *peaks* constitute a merism and indicate that God controls not only them, but everything in between. Verse 5 states that God also owns the *sea* and the *dry land*, the latter formed by God on the third day of creation as he pulled back the seas to allow the land to appear (Gen. 1:9–13). In a different telling of the creation, God gives the sea a boundary and directs it not to 'overstep his command' (Prov. 8:29). The reference to God controlling the sea in verse 5 is particularly remarkable, since the sea often represents the forces of chaos (e.g. Ps. 93:3–5).

95:6–7c. *Our Shepherd*

The psalmist issues a second call to worship, noting that the God they praise is their *Maker*, the Creator of everything, including themselves. He is also their Shepherd (see Pss 23, 100). God not only created human beings, he also guides them, provides for them, and protects them as a shepherd guides, provides for and protects his *flock*.

95:7d–11. *Do not harden your hearts*

The psalm ends with an appeal from God himself to the congregation to trust and obey God. They need to listen to him, not rebel against him. If they obey him today, then they will enter his rest in the future. The psalmist remembers a tragic story from Israel's past in order to encourage them to obedience, namely the rebellion in the wilderness. After God had rescued them from their bondage to Egypt, they travelled to Mount Sinai, where God gave them the law. Even before they reached Mount Sinai, they grumbled over what they saw as a lack of provision for their needs (Exod. 15:22–27). While at Mount Sinai, they sinned against God by worshipping the golden calf (Exod. 32). The psalmist specifically refers to events that took place at sites that were given the name *Meribah* and *Massah*. *Meribah*, which means 'quarrelling', and *Massah*, which means 'testing', were so named because of Israel's reaction to God when they feared they would not have adequate water in the wilderness (Exod. 17:1–7; Num. 20:1–13).¹³⁰ God grew angry with Israel because of their lack of faith in his provision. They were sheep that did not trust their shepherd. For this and for all their rebellion in the wilderness, the first generation of those who left Egypt died in the wilderness after a forty-year wandering. The psalmist, relating a divine oracle, tells the present generation living many years later not to imitate their behaviour, or they too will not enter their rest.

Meaning

Psalm 95 calls on the congregation to praise God as their Creator, King and Shepherd. The psalmist encourages them to trust and obey, in contrast to the generation that left Egypt and quarrelled and tested God in the wilderness, thus bringing on God's anger and his judgment that they would not enter their rest in the Promised Land.

Jesus showed himself to be the obedient Son of God, in contrast to the disobedient sons of God (Israel), when he resisted the temptations presented to him by the devil during his forty days and forty nights of wilderness wandering. He specifically resisted the temptation to 'test' God when the devil told him to

throw himself down from the highest point of the temple (Matt. 4:1–11).

The author of Hebrews addresses his audience many years later with the same charge with which the psalmist confronted his. Christians are like the wanderers in the wilderness, rescued from Egypt (the bondage to sin and death), but not yet arrived in the Promised Land (heaven). Accordingly, the author of Hebrews cites Psalm 95:7–11 and encourages his readers not to succumb to temptation and die in the wilderness without ever reaching their heavenly rest.

Psalm 96. A new song

Context

The psalm identifies itself as a new song, a victory shout, that celebrates God as Victor, King and Judge. The many similarities of this hymn with Psalm 98 will be highlighted in the commentary below. The psalmist is the worship leader who calls on the congregation to offer praise to God.

Comment

96:1–3. *Sing a new song*

The psalm begins by summoning all the earth to join in the praise of God, and that praise is to take place among the nations. Thus, the worship leader, who may be literally addressing the faithful of Israel, extends the call beyond his community to everyone. They are to *praise his name*. God's name is Yahweh, which he revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3), and is connected to his covenant with his people. His name also implies that his reputation is based on the mighty works he has done on behalf of his people. His deeds bring him *glory*, a word (*kābôd*) that literally means 'heavy' and indicates that God is a God of substance and great reputation (Longman 2010: 48–50). They are to sing to God a *new song*, a phrase that normally occurs in warfare contexts and implies that it is a shout of victory (for more see 98:1–3).

96:4–6. *Great is the Lord*

God deserves worship because he is the Creator (*the LORD made the heavens*). He is the only God who deserves praise. In one sense, the other gods exist (see Pss 82; 95:3–5), but in another, they do not. They are *idols*. An idol is an object made by human hands, which, according to Jeremiah, is 'like a scarecrow in a cucumber field' (Jer. 10:5). Idols are nothing to *fear*, but the Lord is worthy of fear, not the kind of fear that makes one run away, but one that acknowledges that God is all-powerful and sovereign over everything. He is majestic, and his earthly dwelling, the *sanctuary*, reflects his *strength* and *glory*. Indeed, the poet piles up words that emphasize his glory (*glory* [*kābôd*], *splendour* [*hôd*], *majesty* [*hādār*]) in order to express the ineffable.

96:7–10. *The Lord reigns*

With a kind of repetitive parallelism reminiscent of the opening of Psalm 29, the worship leader again calls on the whole world (*you families of nations*) to worship God by ascribing to him the *glory* and *strength* which are his (see also v. 6). The phrase *families of nations* (v. 7), though not identical, is reminiscent of the promise to Abraham that God would bless all the ‘families of the earth’ (NRSV) through him and his descendants (Gen. 12:3). God’s people are to come not only with their verbal praise, but also with their offerings given at the sanctuary. The word *offering* (*minhâ*) could be used in the general sense of a sacrifice, but more likely in the sense of an offering given as a gift or tribute to God (Lev. 2). As part of the praise, the congregation are to acknowledge that he is King by shouting out, ‘*The LORD reigns.*’ Because God is King and in sovereign control, the world is stable. The King is also the One who judges in accordance with what people deserve (*with equity*; see also Ps. 98:9).

96:11–13. *Let the world rejoice*

Psalm 96 ends in a similar way to Psalm 98 by having all of creation, animate (the angels in *heaven* and people on *earth*, v. 11) and inanimate (*fields, trees of the forest*, v. 12), rejoicing in God, because he is coming in the future as Judge, and he will set all things right again.

Meaning

The psalmist calls on Israel, and indeed on the whole cosmos, to praise God as the One who saved his people by warfare (implied by new song, v. 1), rules over them as King, and is coming in the future as Judge to set things right. For a New Testament perspective on these themes, see the *Meaning* section of the similar Psalm 98.

Psalm 97. Let the earth be glad

Context

This hymn calls on God's people, and indeed the whole world, to worship the true God, rather than idols. The true God is King, Judge and Saviour. He will destroy his enemies and rescue his people. This God is righteous and just.

Comment

97:1–6. *The Lord reigns*

The psalmist announces that God *reigns* as King (Pss 93:1; 96:10; 99:1; Rev. 19:6). He invites all the inhabitants of the earth to join him in joyful worship. He then describes God's awesome appearance in language that suggests a storm. He comes accompanied by *clouds*, *thick darkness* and *lightning*. Similar language is found in Psalm 18 (vv. 9–15), although there it is clear that God rides the clouds like a chariot. Perhaps the same depiction is intended here. *Fire* precedes him and consumes his enemies. Both cloud and fire remind one of the wilderness period when Israel was led by cloud during the day and fire at night. Both represented God's presence. A cloud serves well to represent God's presence and also his glory, because although it is visible, a cloud obscures one's vision. People cannot see in it or through it; thus the cloud provides a sense of mystery and indirectness in the experience of God's presence. His presence is in the cloud (Exod. 13:21), protecting people from a lethal dose of God's glory. The Pentateuch preserves stories of God's righteous judgment in which the fire that proceeds from him destroys his enemies. When Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, offered 'strange' fire in their incense burners, fire came out from the Lord and consumed them (Lev. 10). God's appearance is so powerful that the mountains, the geographical symbol of stability, melt like wax (Mic. 1:4; see also Nah. 1:5). This awesome God serves the interest of righteousness and justice, which are metaphorically pictured as *the foundation of his throne* (v. 2; see also Ps. 89:14). According to Proverbs 16:12, referring to human kings, 'Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness.'

97:7. *Worship him*

God is glorious and awesome (vv. 1–6), and for that reason the psalmist says that

idol worshippers will be shamed. Idols are, after all, nothing like the true God, and those who worship them are foolish (Isa. 44). Interestingly, using a wordplay on idols (*'ēlîlîm*) and gods (*'ēlōhîm*), the psalmist calls on the *gods* themselves to worship the true God. The gods represented by the idols do not deserve praise; they should worship the true God. In this conception, the gods are real (see also Pss 82; 95:3), but they are spiritual beings (angels and demons) created by the true God.

97:8–12. *You are exalted*

The gods should worship God (v. 7), because he is *exalted far above all gods* (v. 9). Those who worship the true God (*Zion/the villages of Judah*) are glad that their God brings judgment, because his judgments against their enemies save them (v. 10) and bring joy to the righteous. Thus, the psalmist calls on them to join in worshipping the Lord.

Meaning

This psalm (like 96 and 98) combines a focus on God as Saviour, King and Judge. It pictures God as fearsome and righteous, whose judgments benefit his people, but destroy his enemies. Thus his people should worship him.

God has been King from ages past (Ps. 93:2), and he is King today, but the whole world will finally recognize his sovereign rule when Christ returns as King, Judge and Saviour. According to John,

I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

‘Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!’

(Rev. 19:6–7)

Psalm 98. God the Victor, King and Judge

Context

Psalm 98 is similar in content and tone to Psalm 96 (and also shares a focus on God's kingship), but is much tighter in structure. In the first stanza (vv. 1–3), the psalmist calls on Israel to praise the Lord who rescued them in the past. In the second stanza (vv. 4–6), the psalmist broadens the circle of praise to include all the inhabitants of the earth, and encourages them to praise God who is their King in the present. Finally, in the third stanza (vv. 7–9), the psalmist for a third time broadens the call to praise God to include even the inanimate creation (rivers, mountains). Everyone and everything should celebrate God as the future Judge of the world.

The theme of God the Warrior connects his role as Victor, King and Judge (Longman, 1984; Longman and Reid, 1995). The song praises God for winning a victory on the battlefield, which recalls his kingly role and his future judgment. In its original context, the psalm would have been sung after God's people had won a battle against their enemies. This song acknowledges that victory comes only because of God's power.

The title simply identifies the poem as 'a psalm' (see Introduction, p. 28).

Comment

98:1–3. Israel, praise God your Victor in the past

The psalmist calls on Israel to sing a *new song* to the Lord. 'New song' occurs elsewhere in the Psalms (33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 144:9; 149:1), as well as Isaiah (42:10) and the book of Revelation (5:9; 14:3), in contexts connected to warfare. A new song is a hymn of victory sung after God has made all things new by his defeat of the forces of evil. God's *right hand* and *holy arm* typically denote his power in battle (Exod. 6:6; 15:16; Deut. 4:34, etc.), so the *salvation* that the psalmist celebrates is a military one. Love and faithfulness motivated God's actions on behalf of his people Israel. This love (*hesed*) denotes loyalty, and both loyalty and faithfulness derive from God's covenant relationship with his people. God told Israel that, if they were obedient, he would rescue them from their enemies (e.g. Deut. 28:7). The nations, who may even stand for their foes, thus witness God's salvation of Israel.

98:4–6. *All the earth, praise God your King in the present*

Now the psalmist calls on *all the earth* to praise God. After all, while God may have been Victor for Israel alone, he is the *King* of all the inhabitants of the earth, whether that is acknowledged or not. Often God's victory is connected to his kingship (e.g. Exod. 15), since his defeat of the enemy demonstrates his power. The singing was to be appropriately accompanied by instrumental music, composed of stringed (*harp*) and wind instruments (*trumpets, ram's horn*). The human voice alone was insufficient to render praise to God.

98:7–9. *All of creation, praise God your Judge in the future*

God is Victor in the past, King in the present and Judge in the future. God as Judge is again connected to his appearance as Warrior, as he saves his people and punishes those who harm them. In this case, by means of poetic personification, all of creation (*sea, rivers, mountains*) joins in as they anticipate God re-establishing the righteousness and equity that has been disturbed by sin.

Meaning

In its original setting, the salvation accomplished by God the Warrior was a military one. God won a victory for Israel, and the psalmist calls on the faithful in Israel to praise him (vv. 1–3). In the second stanza (vv. 4–6), the call expands to all the inhabitants of the earth to praise God who is their King. Finally (vv. 7–9), the psalmist turns to all of creation, animate and inanimate, to celebrate God as the coming Judge.

In the New Testament, Jesus is our Warrior, but he fights against the spiritual powers and authorities, and not against 'flesh and blood' (see Introduction, p. 50). Thus, Christians are not wrong to sing this song of praise to Jesus their Warrior who has won their spiritual salvation. Jesus is our Victor, our King (the Messiah), and also the coming Judge who will restore all of creation to its original harmony (Rom. 8:18–25).

Psalm 99. Let the nations tremble

Context

Psalm 99 shares a focus on God's kingship along with Psalms 93, 95, 96, 97 and 98. Calling for the nations to praise God, it also depicts God as a just Judge, as well as One who listens to those who call out to him. The psalm has a refrain (vv. 3, 5, 9) that varies, but which calls on Israel to praise God because of his holy nature.

Comment

99:1–3. *The Lord reigns*

Like Psalms 93 and 97, this psalm begins with the proclamation that *the LORD reigns* (see also 96:10) and calls for the nations to respond by trembling with fear because they recognize his sovereign control over everything as their King. In the second parallelism of verse 1, God is described as the One *enthroned between the cherubim*, a reference to the cherubim depicted over the ark of the covenant kept in the Holy of Holies. These 'cherubim are to have their wings spread upwards, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking towards the cover' (Exod. 25:20). Their faces pointed down because God was enthroned above the ark which was his footstool (1 Chr. 28:2; see commentary below on v. 5). Since God has made his glorious presence manifest in the sanctuary, the whole earth should *shake* with fear. For this reason, the nations should worship God who is *holy*.

99:4–5. *Worship at his footstool*

As King, God deserves worship because he is a just Judge. He has established *justice* in Israel (*Jacob*), and also for this reason, God should be praised at his *footstool*, a reference to the ark of the covenant (see above). The second stanza, like the first, ends with the proclamation that God is *holy*, that is, set apart from everything else.

99:6–9. *Exalt the Lord*

The psalmist now looks to the past and those who served as priests; indeed, *Moses* and *Aaron* were first-generation priests. Moses, of course, was a Levite,

though not specifically described as a priest elsewhere. Aaron, his brother, was the first high priest. *Samuel*, the last judge, functioned as a priest from his youth. The composer cites these men as examples of those who prayed to God and God answered them. Referring to Moses and Aaron, he reminds his hearers that God spoke to them from *the pillar of cloud* that guided them through the wilderness (Exod. 13:20–21). These men were also obedient to God’s law. By mentioning this, the psalmist intends to encourage his audience to be similarly observant of God’s law. Although God forgives, he also punishes sin. One might think of God’s response to the golden calf (Exod. 32 – 34). God declared his intention to destroy Israel and start over again with Moses, but Moses called on the Lord, and the Lord ‘relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened’ (Exod. 32:14). Even though God forgave, he also punished them for these misdeeds, using the Levites to kill 3,000 calf worshippers and sending a plague into the camp. The psalm ends with one more call to worship the Lord and, like the first two, the final stanza ends with the statement that *God is holy*.

Meaning

The psalm celebrates God, who, as King, rules over the whole earth and, as Judge, establishes justice. He also answers the prayers of his obedient people, citing examples from the past (Moses, Aaron and Samuel) as testimony. God spoke to and through these three great figures from the past. He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud (v. 7). Christian readers are reminded of the opening verses of the book of Hebrews: ‘In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...’ (Heb. 1:1–2). For a further New Testament perspective on this psalm, particularly its theme of kingship, see Psalm 98 (*Meaning*).

Psalm 100. Enter his gates with thanksgiving

Context

The hundredth psalm is a hymn that calls on the whole earth to gather at the sanctuary to offer their heartfelt praise to God, their Creator and Shepherd.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

100:1–3. We are his

The psalmist calls on *all the earth* to worship God with enthusiasm by singing songs of praise. This praise will arise from knowledge (*Know that the LORD is God*), which ‘signifies acknowledgement or confession’ (VanGemeren 2008: 742) of who God is. He is our Creator, and thus we belong to him.^[131] Indeed, he is our Shepherd, and like *sheep* we benefit from his protection, guidance and provision (see also Pss 23; 95:7).

100:4–5. Give thanks

The psalmist directs the people to the sanctuary. They should sing their praises as they enter the holy precincts of the temple (*gates, courts*). After all, God is good, loving and faithful. These terms are all connected to the covenant, where God promises to be our God and take care of us as a good shepherd should.

Meaning

The composer calls on all the earth to stream into the sanctuary singing praises to God, their Creator and Shepherd. He is their God, and they belong to him. They can count on him for guidance, protection and provision.

Micah looks forward to the day when the nations will indeed come into God’s presence with praise:

In the last days

the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and peoples will stream to it.
(Mic. 4:1)

The author of Hebrews tells his Christian readers that they have indeed come to 'Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven' (12:22–23).

Psalm 101. A blameless heart

Context

The title names David as composer, and the content of the psalm supports its identification as a royal or kingship song. The composer, for instance, has the power to silence those who slander their neighbour (v. 5), and even to *cut off every evildoer from the city of the LORD* (v. 8). The speaker asserts his innocence before God (see Ps. 26). Although it does not contain a lengthy complaint, the question (*when will you come to me?*) implies a feeling of distance from God, and thus this royal psalm is also a lament. The numerous connections with the teaching of Proverbs, as noted in the *Comment*, suggest that the psalm has a wisdom influence as well.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

101:1–4. I will follow you, Lord

The composer begins with a list of statements that express his intentions concerning his relationship with God. He will worship God by extolling God's *love* (or covenant loyalty; *hesed*) and his *justice*. The rest of his statements have to do with the manner in which he will conduct his life. In short, he will be obedient to God and distance himself from evildoers – the latter because he hates what *faithless people* do. These are people who turn aside or go astray from following God. The word for 'faithless people' (*bēliyya'al*) is hard to translate in a precise way. Murphy says that 'the phrase means more than "worthless" and less than "devilish" ' (Murphy 1998: 36). Thus, he will keep far away from evil people and situations (vv. 3–4). He will be *blameless* before God, and he will make sure that he guides his house blamelessly. If, as the title indicates, the king is the composer, then *house* here means dynasty, and may even refer to the whole nation, perhaps with an allusion to 2 Samuel 7:1–17; 23:1–7. Whether on a family or national level, it is true that 'unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labour in vain' (Ps. 127:1). As noted in the *Context*, the open-ended question of verse 2 (*when will you come to me?*) implies that the composer feels distanced from God. He proclaims his innocence in his attempt to draw God close to him.

101:5. I will put to silence

The speaker will do more than distance himself from evil; he will take active steps to curtail it (part of the king's responsibility; see 1 Sam. 9:17 ESV), thus showing that he is in a position of power to do so (see *Context*). In particular, he will *silence* those who *slander*. To slander someone is to speak negatively (and falsely) about them in a way that besmirches their reputation. Proverbs consistently condemns slander as a form of foolish speech (Prov. 10:18; 20:19). He also will not tolerate those whose personality (*heart*) and demeanour (*eyes*) exude pride. Proverbs too condemns pride as the attitude of the foolish who think they are the centre of the world and don't listen to the correction of others (Prov. 3:7; 21:24; 29:23). The psalmist testifies to his own humility of heart and eyes in Psalm 131.

101:6. I will associate with the righteous

The composer, the king, will be on the lookout for likeminded people (*the faithful; the one whose way of life is blameless*), and he will bring them near him, so they can serve him. As king, he surrounds himself with righteous people, the formula to a successful reign. Proverbs 22:11 states, 'One who loves a pure heart and who speaks with grace will have the king for a friend.'

101:7–8. I will put to silence

The psalmist distances himself from those who speak falsely. Thus, he knows, as the sages taught, 'If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials become wicked' (Prov. 29:12). The psalmist will use his power to keep *the city of the LORD* (Jerusalem) free from evil. He will silence the wicked.

Meaning

The psalm's content indicates that the original speaker was the king who was in a position of power to keep evildoers at bay. He expresses his own innocence while also calling on God to come to him.

The title specifically names David as the composer. The book of Samuel presents David as a king who sought to live life blamelessly, and we can imagine times in David's life when he could utter this prayer with integrity (indeed, see the prayer of 2 Sam. 23:1–7). However, we also know that David was far from perfect and sinned egregiously (1 Samuel 11 – 12). Solomon, his son, started his reign with great promise, seeking God and his wisdom above all else, but ended his life as an apostate and oppressor. While some were better than others, none of the kings that follow in the history of Israel and Judah was consistently

blameless. The only anointed Son of David who could sing this psalm with perfect integrity at all times is Jesus Christ.

Christians often feel uncomfortable praying a psalm which calls on God to come near based on our own blamelessness. Perhaps Paul's teaching makes it perfectly clear that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). That said, Jesus died for our sins and stands in our place. On that ground, we can pray Psalm 101 on the basis of Christ's righteousness.

Psalm 102. I am in distress

Context

This psalm is an individual lament (see the title: *A prayer of an afflicted person who has grown weak and pours out a lament before the LORD*), but the speaker's suffering is part of the community's suffering, as can be seen in his call to *have compassion on* (v. 13) and *rebuild* (v. 16) Zion. Interestingly, Psalm 102 is traditionally categorized as a penitential psalm, a psalm in which the speaker confesses sin and connects his troubles to that sin (see Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 130, 143), but while the composer bemoans his condition and seeks relief, as in the other psalms so categorized, this one has no acknowledgment of sin. It is possible that the psalmist does see God's wrath as connected to his sin, but no explicit connection is made.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

102:1–2. Hear my prayer

The psalm opens with a plea for help in a time of distress and an invocation of God. He wants God's palpable presence (*Do not hide your face from me*). He wants God to listen and to answer his prayer. The specific nature of the distress is not explained, so this prayer can be used in similar, though not necessarily identical, conditions to those that motivated the original composition.

102:3–11. I suffer

Although the psalmist does not identify the specific cause of his suffering, he uses figurative language to paint a vivid picture of the depth of his distress. Indeed, his suffering evokes connections with Job, Jeremiah and other well-known afflicted people in the Bible. *Smoke* is temporary; it appears, but is insubstantial, and then it is gone. So, says the psalmist, is his life (*my days*). He suffers physically. His *bones burn like glowing embers*. Bones 'were often viewed as the seat of one's physical strength and health' (*NIDOTTE* 3: 500). Job similarly expressed his physical ailments as a weakening or painfulness in his bones (4:4; 30:17; cf. 33:19, 21), and Jeremiah also famously described his suffering at not being able to refrain from speaking as 'a fire shut up in my

bones' (Jer. 20:9). The psalmist goes on to talk about his *heart*, or inner self, as being *blighted* (or stricken; so NRSV), withered like grass. *Grass* is short-lived and under the hot sun of Palestine loses life, turns yellow and shrivels up. In other words, he is heart sick. His distress causes him to *groan*, and since he forgets to eat his food in his sadness and anxiety, he is reduced to skin and bones (see also v. 9), again echoing the complaint of Job (Job 19:20). The picture of the *owl among the ruins* or the *bird alone on a roof* expresses his emptiness and alienation. He is alone in his suffering. Owls are also nocturnal creatures, making them a fitting analogy to the psalmist who is unable to sleep at night (v. 7a).

In verse 8, he points to those who intensify his problems, namely those who *taunt* him. Job describes the misery that resulted from being reviled by those who had previously been subordinate to him (Job 30). But he knows that the ultimate cause of his affliction is none other than God (again like Job). God is angry with him, and thus he is passing out of existence like a *shadow* at evening or *grass* that withers under the sun (v. 11).

102:12–17. *Rebuilding Zion*

In spite of his distress, the psalmist has hope in God. In this third stanza, we also see that the psalmist's individual suffering is part of the community's suffering. Not only is the psalmist withering away, but *Zion* (Jerusalem, perhaps representing all of God's people) also suffers and is in need of restoration. Zion's inhabitants need God to show favour to the city, and the psalmist expresses confidence that indeed the *appointed time* for change has come. However, the need is for more than a physical restoration of the city, but for God to bring his *glory* back to Zion. While it is not clear whether this psalm was composed during the period of the exile when God caused his glory to depart from the temple (Ezek. 9 – 11), it is certainly an appropriate prayer for that occasion. God is King (he sits enthroned), and he will respond to the prayers of his afflicted (*destitute*) people.

102:18–22. *Declaring God's praise in Zion*

The psalmist appeals to God to intervene in his own suffering as well as that of the community by reminding him that his acts of redemption will elicit the future worship of his people. Once God has intervened and saved them, he calls for an account of the rescue to be written down so that a future generation can praise God for his great act. The psalms of remembrance specialize in such worship (see Ps. 136 as an example). God's sanctuary on high refers to his heavenly

throne. As he looks down on earth, he sees the suffering of his people who are likened to prisoners on death row. To say that God looks down from heaven not only means that he is aware of what is going on, it implies that he takes action, and when he takes action, he succeeds. So God helps his people and they respond with praise. Verse 22 implies that all the world, not just his chosen people, will eventually praise God.

102:23–28. You remain the same

In the final stanza, the psalmist returns to his own individual struggles. Although he is not an old man (he is in the midst of his days which are being *cut short*), he apparently faces a life-threatening situation (perhaps sickness or some other physical threat). Knowing that God is the only One to help him, he asks God to do so.

His awareness that his life is short and fragile leads him to reflect on God's eternal nature. God was there at the beginning when he created the heavens and the earth. They will not last forever, but God will survive them. They are perishable, but God is imperishable. Since he will be there forever, he will be there in future generations, for the present generation's children and their children's children and so on.

Meaning

Like the psalmist, Christians experience the dark realities of a hostile world, both individually, and corporately as a church. Psalm 102 invites us to bring our troubles to God and to ask him to make his presence known to us. The psalmist's confidence that God will hear should engender hope in us as well. After all, although we are fragile, God is eternal.

Interestingly, the author of Hebrews applies this psalm, and in particular verses 25–27, to Jesus, pointing out to his contemporary audience that Jesus is vastly superior to the angels. The logic of this is that Jesus is God, and thus what the book of Psalms ascribes to the Lord is rightfully applied to Jesus. He is the One, after all, through whom 'all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made' (John 1:3). He is from the beginning, and his years will never end.

Psalm 103. Forget not all his benefits

Context

The psalm opens and closes with a call to praise in a way that is well known in the hymnic literature of the Psalms, although this psalm is the first to use it. That said, verses 3–5, which are addressed by the psalmist to himself, appear to be reflecting on God’s act of forgiveness and healing in his life, which leads us to consider the psalm as a thanksgiving prayer. The psalm begins as the prayer of an individual, but eventually the individual speaks on behalf of the community. As Broyles points out, the contrast between individual and corporate prayers is not a strict one, since ‘Israel’s worship was primarily public. In this public setting, a liturgist would lead the singing of psalms and speak on behalf of both the corporate body and its individual members’ (Broyles 1999: 394).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

103:1–5. O my soul

While other psalms open with a call for the assembled faithful to praise God, the psalmist here urges himself to worship. He desires that his praise not be pro forma, but to emanate from the deepest recesses of his heart (*soul/inmost being*). Of course, by exhorting himself publicly to praise, he encourages others to join in. To motivate his worship, he cites all the *benefits* that come to the faithful, in a series of participial clauses in verses 3–5. He begins by remembering that God *forgives* sin. Sin creates a barrier between humanity and a holy God, but God will forgive the sin of a contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). He can heal not only our spiritual state, but also our bodies. He is the divine healer. Indeed, the connection between forgiving sin and healing may indicate that the psalmist himself is thanking God for healing him from sickness that he believed was connected to his sin (a connection made explicit in Ps. 38:1–8; Brown 1995: 150). This sickness was serious, because God redeemed his life from the *pit*, the pit being a metaphor for the grave/underworld. But God does more than save him from death; he also *crowns* him with *love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) and *compassion*. These are God’s qualities promised to his covenant partners that explain why God does not simply abandon his people, even when they sin. God not only protects the

psalmist from negative things like illness and death; he gives him *good things* as well. For instance, God not only allows the psalmist to survive death; he rejuvenates him. It is as if he is young again. An *eagle* was a symbol of strength and vitality (Isa. 40:31).

103:6–12. God's character

In the previous stanza, the psalmist had been focusing on the benefits he has enjoyed from God. Now he makes clear that he knows that they are not just for him, but for all God's faithful people, here characterized as the *oppressed*. God makes his *justice* known to the oppressed, and the psalmist backs up this claim with an appeal to the past. At the time of *Moses*, God showed how he worked justice for the oppressed by freeing the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and judging the Egyptians with plague and at the Re(e)d Sea. He further revealed his ways to Moses as *compassionate* and *gracious*, patient (*slow to anger*) and *abounding in love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) in the aftermath of the sin with the golden calf (see Exod. 34:4–7; Ps. 86:15). He did not treat Israel at that time as their sins deserved, but graciously he forgave them. The psalmist, healed from a deadly disease that resulted from his sin, sees this as a pattern that should be praised. God's *love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) towards those who have the proper attitude towards him (*fear*, v. 11; see commentary at 2:10–12 and 10:2–11) promised in the covenant is as great as the heavens are high above the earth. Using another spatial metaphor, the psalmist affirms the finality of God's forgiveness of sin by saying that he removes transgression from us *as far as the east is from the west*.

103:13–18. As a Father

God is like a Father to his people (*those who fear him*). He shows *compassion* (note the interesting sound play at the opening of v. 12: 'as far as' [*kirḥōq*] and 'As...has compassion' [*kěrahēm*]) towards them, knowing their weakness. He knows that humans are fragile, part of the creation, as demonstrated by the picture of Adam formed from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). Humans are like *grass* that flourishes (*like a flower of the field*) and then withers and dies when the hot dry wind typical of Israel blows over it (see also Pss 37:2; 90:5; 102:4, 11), a metaphor that again shows the fragility and brevity of human life. In contrast to the temporal nature of humanity, God's *love* (*hesed*; loyalty) and *righteousness* towards his people lasts forever, as it extends beyond one person's limited lifespan to their children and grandchildren and beyond. While God is loyal to the covenant, he does also require that his people are loyal to the

covenant and keep the law.

103:20–22. *Praise the Lord*

The psalm opened with the psalmist exhorting himself to worship God. At the end, he calls on others to join him. First, he proclaims God's universal kingship. God rules not only over his people in Israel, but over the entire cosmos from his heavenly *throne*. Thus, everyone, including the *angels* who make up his heavenly army (*hosts*), as well as humanity (*all his works everywhere in his dominion*), should praise him. The psalmist closes by repeating the first call as a final call to worship (*Praise the LORD, my soul*).

Meaning

The psalmist urges himself and eventually the whole cosmos to praise and thank God for healing him spiritually (by forgiveness) and physically (from a deadly disease). Indeed, the implication is that the disease was a consequence of his sin. Of course, not all suffering is explained by personal sin (see the book of Job), nor does sin always lead to immediate suffering, but that does not mean that sin cannot lead to suffering. It is significant, for instance, that Jesus forgave the paralysed man's sins before healing him of his affliction (Luke 5:17–26). Indeed, the Pharisees and teachers of the religious law may be alluding to Psalm 103:3 when they say that only God can forgive sins (Luke 5:21). Indeed, that is true and it demonstrates that Jesus himself is God.

Psalm 104. Creator and Sustainer

Context

Psalm 104 is a hymn that celebrates God as Creator and Sustainer of all life on earth. In the opening and closing verses, the psalmist, as in Psalm 103, calls on himself to worship God, but, as the worship leader, he extends an invitation to the whole congregation to join him (see the concluding call to ‘praise the LORD’, v. 35).

Scholars have often pointed to the similarities between this psalm and an earlier Hymn to Aten, an Egyptian poem from the time of Akhenaten (1379–1352 BC; Hilber 2009: 409). The Egyptologist John Foster points to similarities of tone, general content and at least one specific passage (Foster 2006: 1759). The shared tone is one of awe in their respective deity’s creation and sustenance of the cosmos. The speaker in the Aten hymn is none other than Pharaoh Akhenaten, who is well known for his suppression of the worship of other gods in favour of exclusive worship of the sun disk Aten. The general content, according to Foster, concerns the hymn’s focus particularly on the respective gods’ provision for their creatures. The specific passage that bears a close similarity to a section of the Aten hymn is found in verses 20–26 (see commentary below). The connection between the Egyptian and Hebrew hymn is convincing and shows that the latter was aware of the former. However, the difference between the two poems is even more striking. After all, Akhenaten is worshipping the sun disk, and the Israelite psalmist is worshipping the Creator of the sun and all of the cosmos. The picture of God as cloud rider accompanied by messengers, described as flames of fire in the opening verses, as well as an allusion to Leviathan, further suggests that the psalmist was also inspired by West Semitic poetry. In short, the evidence indicates that the psalmist utilized many different poetic resources as he worshipped the true God, who created and sustains the cosmos.

Comment

104:1. *O my soul*

As in Psalm 103, the psalmist begins by urging himself (*my soul*) to worship God. He addresses God directly and calls him great, as he pictures him clothed

with *splendour* and *majesty*, two words closely associated with the more common term ‘glory’ (*kābôd*; Longman, 2010).

104:2–4. *He rides the wind*

After addressing the Lord directly, the psalmist now speaks about him, presumably to the congregation. He continues the clothing motif as he speaks of God wrapping himself in *light*. Light is the opposite of darkness, which is often associated with evil. Light illumines and dazzles. Here too the light may emanate from the sun, which is of interest considering that this psalm appears to have connections to the Egyptian Aten hymn (see *Context*), which extols the Aten or sun disk. The view that the light is that associated with the sun is supported by the fact that the next two cola speak about creation, using a tent analogy. Heaven is like a tent that God puts up (*stretches out*) and in which he dwells. The understanding that the heavens contained massive amounts of water was an ancient idea confirmed by the rain that fell from the sky (God’s *upper chambers*).

The second half of verse 3 and verse 4 move to storm-god imagery. God, like the storm god Baal in the Ugaritic texts, rides the *cloud*, the vehicular cloud being his war chariot. Other biblical texts share this imagery (Deut. 33:26; Pss 18:9; 68:4; Isa. 19:1; Nah. 1:3). Interestingly, the Ugaritic texts describe the sea god Yam’s messengers as *flames of fire*, providing a background to the description of the Lord’s *messengers* (or angels) in verse 4b. If the cloud is a storm cloud, then perhaps flames of fire refer to the lightning.

104:5–9. *He set the earth*

Moving from God’s creation and presence in heaven, the psalmist now poetically describes God’s creation of the earth. This description does not intend to tell us how God created the earth in any kind of scientific way; rather, it speaks to the cognitive environment of its original audience whose cosmology was different from our own.^[132] The intended point that it is the Lord and not anyone else who created the earth is clear and profound.^[133]

According to the psalmist, God first sets the earth on its *foundations* (Job 38:4; Ps. 75:3) and covers it with the watery depths, again using the language of clothing. The waters were above the mountains until God rebuked them (evoking Ancient Near Eastern, cosmic-conflict mythological language where God’s act of creation was a battle between the creator [Baal; Marduk] and the sea god [Yam/Leviathan; Tiamat]). The waters fled from his voice (the *thunder*) and settled in the valley where God set a *boundary* on them. Job 38 provides a

similar picture of God placing a boundary on the chaotic sea and then declaring to the personified sea, ‘This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt’ (v. 11).

Verses 5–13 are also an interesting contrast with Psalm 24, where God says he founded the earth on the waters, whereas here it is reversed, and the earth is swathed by the waters.

104:10–18. *He provides waters*

God controlled the chaotic waters and set a boundary for them (vv. 3–9), and then he manages them for the benefit of his creatures (in other words, this stanza moves from God’s work of creation in the past, to its benefits for the present). He causes the waters to flow in the *ravines* (wadis), the seasonal streams of Israel. In this way, he provides the water needed for the animals to survive and even thrive (*The birds of the sky nest by the waters; they sing among the branches*, v. 12). The waters come from springs (v. 10), but also from the *upper chambers* which contain the waters in heaven (v. 3). Heaven is often pictured as a place where meteorological phenomena are stored, ready to be released by God when he so desires. Heaven contains a storehouse of rain with which God can bless the earth (Deut. 28:12), but also storehouses that contain the more destructive forces of wind (Ps. 135:7; Jer. 10:13; 51:16), snow and hail (Job 38:22–30). Humans benefit from God’s provision of water. The *grass* grows for the cattle, and plants for human consumption. These plants produce *wine* (grapes), *oil* (olives) and *bread* (wheat), allowing humans not only to survive, but to thrive and be happy.

104:19–23. *The moon and the sun*

God created the *moon* and the *sun* in order to mark night and day. Here the psalmist recalls God’s act on the fourth day of creation when he ‘made two great lights – the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night’ (Gen. 1:16). During the night, under the light of the moon, the wild animals (*all the beasts of the forest*), in particular the *lions*, are awake and seek their prey, but when the *sun rises*, they go to their dens to rest, while humans begin their work in order to provide their sustenance. In this way, the psalmist celebrates the fact that God’s creation is well-ordered and rhythmic.

This stanza and the next have a particularly close connection to the Hymn to Aten (see *Context*), which describes lions that ‘come out from the deeps of their caves, snakes bite and sting; Darkness muffles, and earth is silent’, and then addresses the Aten (the deified sun disk): ‘you drive away darkness, offer your

arrows of shining, and the Two Lands are lively with morning-song' (Foster 2006: 1752).

104:24–26. *In wisdom you made them*

The composer exuberantly glorifies God for his creative work. He notes that creation was not made in random fashion, but through God's *wisdom* (Prov. 3:19–20; 8:22–31). The singer celebrates the abundance of life on the earth, in particular in the sea, which is filled with a great variety of creatures and all kinds of fish. They are both large and small. In particular, the psalmist mentions *Leviathan*, described elsewhere as the most formidable of sea creatures (Job 41), a multi-headed (Ps. 74:14) 'monster of the sea' (Isa. 27:1). Leviathan is known as a seven-headed sea monster in Ugaritic mythology. In the Bible, though formidable, Leviathan is easily controlled by God. Although in other contexts Leviathan represents dangerous evil, here it is presented as God's creature which enjoys its God-given habitat, the sea. While the depths of the sea are the dwelling place of God's sea creatures, humans sail the surface in their *ships*. Another close parallel with the Hymn to Aten is found in this stanza, as it extols Aten who makes 'ships float downstream or sail for the south, each path lies open because of your rising. Fish in the River leap in your sight, and your rays strike deep in the Great Green Sea' (Foster 2006: 1752).

104:27–30. *You provide food*

All God's creatures, animal and human, depend utterly on God for life and sustenance. We live and die by God's decision. Our food comes from God's *hand*, a metaphorical description that shows his personal involvement. When he removes his presence (*hides his face*), we die. Creatures die and turn back to dust, and then God through his *Spirit* creates new life, again describing the rhythm of God's creation. Although Genesis speaks of God's breath (*něšāmâ*) and the psalmist of God's Spirit (*rûah*), the psalmist may well be alluding to Genesis 2:7 and the creation of the first human from the dust and God's breath of life.

104:31–32. *The glory of God*

The psalm has described how God creates life and abundantly sustains us. His creatures not only exist and survive, but thrive and enjoy life because of his provision. Thus, the psalmist expresses his wish that God's glory and his enjoyment will last forever. As he does so, he extols God's power by noting that the very *earth* trembles and the *mountains* (the geographical symbol of stability)

smoke when God merely looks at them.

104:33–35. O my soul

The psalm began with a self-exhortation to worship, and it ends as it began (*Praise the LORD, my soul*), along with an expression of the psalmist's intention to do so all his life. He asks that his meditation, as presented in the previous verses, may please God and bring him enjoyment. Although the psalm has up to this point consistently described God's creation and his creatures as happy and harmonious, at the end the psalmist acknowledges that there are *sinners* and calls for their eradication. The very final word is a call to the congregation to join him in his worship of God (*Praise the LORD* ; Heb. *halēlûyāh*, *the first time this familiar expression occurs in the Psalms*).

Meaning

Psalm 104 revels in God as Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos and its inhabitants, both animal and human. Its opening pictures God as clothed in light (sun imagery) and riding the cloud (storm imagery). The opening of John's Gospel speaks of Jesus as the Word who was with God and 'through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it' (1:3–5). The One who said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' (John 8:12) also spoke of appearing on a cloud at the end of time, rescuing his people and bringing judgment on those who resist him (Matt. 24:30; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; Rev. 1:7).¹³⁴ The author of Hebrews cites 104:4 to support his argument that Jesus is superior to the angels (Heb. 1:7).

The New Testament ends with a marvellous depiction of the world to come as the new Jerusalem. Interestingly, there is no need for the sun or the moon, 'for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp...There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever' (Rev. 21:23; 22:5).

Psalm 105. He remembered his holy promise

Context

A remembrance psalm, Psalm 105 looks back on the history of the people of God from the time of the patriarchs to the time of the conquest. God had made a covenant with Abraham and told him that his descendants would become a 'great nation' (Gen. 12:2). Such a promise implies land, and so Psalm 105 follows Abraham's descendants as they go down to Egypt during the time of Joseph and then are freed from Egyptian bondage by Moses and Aaron. God continues to provide for them and protect them through the wilderness and ultimately gives them the land by means of conquest.

Comment

105:1–4. *Seek his face*

According to Exodus 19:6, Israel was to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation', mediating God's greatness to the other nations. Here the psalmist calls on Israel to praise God in such a way as to testify to the nations about God's great acts in history. He tells the congregation to praise God and that all should rely on him (*Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always*, v. 4).

105:5–7. *His judgments*

The psalmist calls on the people to *remember* God's wonders, that is, his great acts by which he showed his love for them, acts of deliverance. They are the descendants of the patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob, to whom the promises were given (see below). Remembrance in the Old Testament is more than simply an act of cognition; it is a call on Israel to appropriate the memory by gaining their confidence in the present and their hope for the future.

105:8–11. *He remembers his covenant*

In the previous stanza, the psalmist urged Israel to remember God's great acts; in the present section, he reminds them that God *remembers his covenant* with them. As stated above, remembrance means more than simply mental recall; God acts on his covenant and will always do so. The specific covenant evoked is that with *Abraham*, in which God promised to make Abraham's descendants into

‘a great nation’ (Gen. 12:2; see vv. 1–3), which implies many descendants as well as land. Although this is not called a covenant in Genesis 12 where it is first initiated, it is referred to as such when God went to reassure a doubting Abraham that he would indeed provide the land of Canaan to the patriarch’s descendants (Gen. 15:18). As the book of Genesis continues, God reaffirms his covenant to Abraham’s son *Isaac* (see Gen. 26:4) and to Abraham’s grandson *Jacob* (Gen. 28:13–15), who is given a new name *Israel* (Gen. 32:22–32). The psalmist and his audience knew that God had acted on this promise, because, although we are not certain exactly when this psalm was written, we do know that the people lived in the land of promise (see vv. 42–45).

105:12–15. *The patriarchs*

During the patriarchal period (from Abraham to Jacob), they were indeed *few in number* (sixty-six people left Canaan to live in Egypt at the time of Joseph; Gen. 46:26). During this period, they were *strangers* in the land of Canaan. They were not settled in any one place, but rather moved from place to place. Throughout this time, God took care of them. One of the many examples of God’s protection of the patriarchs is his rebuke of King Abimelek of Gerar, who took Sarah into his harem, not knowing (because Abraham had lied) that she was the patriarch’s wife (Gen. 20:3). The psalm refers to the patriarchs as *prophets* here (v. 15), which is unexpected, except that Genesis too refers to Abraham as a prophet in the context to which we have just referred (Gen. 20:7). They were, after all, the intermediaries between God and the foreign kings.

105:16–23. *Joseph*

Moving on from the patriarchs, the psalmist now encapsulates the account of *Joseph* (Gen. 37 – 50) in a few verses, where he faithfully represents this period of time, while also adding some vivid details not found in the narrative in Genesis. In the first place, verse 16 attributes the famine to God’s action, while Genesis just reports the coming of the famine without explicitly connecting it to God’s will. Interestingly, neither the psalm nor Genesis gives a reason why God would send a famine. While Joseph’s brothers were the ones who sold him to the Ishmaelites, who then sold him to Potiphar as a slave, Joseph is indeed mindful that ‘God intended it for good...the saving of many lives’ (Gen. 50:20). Joseph’s life story is a powerful illustration of the providence of God. While the Genesis account does not mention Joseph being placed in *shackles*, this may be implied by the fact that he became a slave and certainly when he was imprisoned after being falsely charged with rape by Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39). While in prison,

thanks to God, he correctly interpreted the dreams of the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, so later when Pharaoh had dreams, the chief cupbearer secured Joseph's release from prison. The dreams anticipated seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, and so, with Joseph's help, Pharaoh could prepare for the worst. Joseph thus rose to prominence in Egypt and, according to the psalmist, taught the other leaders of Egypt (*princes/elders*) wisdom, even though Egypt was a place renowned for wisdom. The famine hit Canaan hard too, and Jacob's family was rescued by Joseph's presence and power when they moved down to Egypt (*Ham*) to survive.

105:24–38. *Moses and the exodus*

The single largest stanza of the poem focuses on the exodus, which was the salvation event par excellence in the Old Testament, demonstrating that God can save his helpless people against formidable enemies. The account in the book of Exodus also begins by mentioning how *fruitful* and *numerous* the descendants of Abraham had become in the land of Egypt (Exod. 1:6–7), reminding the reader of God's promise to the patriarchs that they would have many descendants, and even recalling the command to the first couple to 'be fruitful and increase in number' (Gen. 1:28). While such growth was good news for Israel, it was bad news for the Egyptian leadership, who grew fearful about the Hebrews' strength in their midst. The poet does not detail the conspiracy of the Egyptians against the Hebrews, but Exodus tells of their forced labour and the decree to kill their baby boys (Exod. 1:11–22).

The poet then quickly turns to God's response when he commissions *Moses* and his brother *Aaron* to go to Egypt as his representatives (Exod. 3). As he turns to the plagues, he is not interested in giving a full account (two plagues are not mentioned) or even following the sequence presented in the exodus. He starts with the ninth of the ten wonders, the plague of *darkness*, before reverting to the earlier sign in which the waters of the Nile were turned into blood. He follows these with the plague of frogs (v. 30), flies, gnats (v. 31), hail that destroyed the crops (v. 32), and locusts (v. 34). The emphasis throughout is on the total destruction of the land. The reason given for the plagues is that the Egyptians, as represented by Pharaoh, refused to obey God's words (v. 28b) as mediated through Moses and Aaron: 'Let my people go.' While the sequence of the plagues is not observed, the list does conclude with the climactic plague on the *firstborn* (v. 36), the event that finally persuaded Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go, perhaps because this plague touched Pharaoh's own family (Exod. 11:5). The psalmist takes particular glee in the way the Egyptians plied them with precious

metals as they left, since they were so glad to see them go (vv. 37–38; Exod. 12:33–36). In a sense, the Hebrews were finally paid for their onerous labour for the Egyptians.

105:39–41. *The wilderness*

The psalmist continues his remembrance of God's mighty acts by citing God's providential protection and provision in the wilderness. He is not interested in the stories of grumbling and rebellion, but in all that God had done for that generation. God made his presence known through a *cloud* that covered them during the day and gave them *light at night* (Exod. 40:34–38). Since the psalmist is more interested in discussing God's protection than his guidance, he does not mention that it was through the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of cloud by night that he led them through the wilderness (Exod. 13:20–21). He provided food for them, both *quail* (Exod. 16:13; Num. 11:4–35) as well as manna (Exod. 16:14–16), here called *the bread of heaven* (Exod. 16:4) since it appeared to fall out of the sky. He even provided water out of a *rock* to assuage their thirst (Exod. 17:1–7; Num. 20:1–13).

105:42–45. *The conquest*

Why did God do these mighty acts? Why did he providentially protect and provide for this people? Why did he rescue them from Egypt? The poet cites God's holy promise to Abraham that he would make them a great nation and would bless them, and through them the other nations (Gen. 12:1–3). Thus, the psalm ends with the conquest, when God *gave them the lands of the nations, and they fell heir to what others had toiled for*. As Deuteronomy 6:10–11 anticipated, God gave them 'flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant'. Moses followed this with the charge to be careful not to 'forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' (Deut. 6:12). In this spirit, the psalmist calls on Israel to remember, to obey God's law (v. 45) and to worship.

Meaning

Psalm 105 looks back over the history of Israel to celebrate how God has protected the Israelites and provided for them from the time of Abraham to the conquest. Remembering former times builds up confidence for the present and hope for the future as they contemplate God's great acts in the past.

Remembrance psalms invite Christians to look to the past in order to see

God's great acts. Of course, we have an even longer history to contemplate and one that climaxes in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Indeed, as Paul thinks about the crossing of the sea at the time of the exodus and the provision of water from the rock in the wilderness, he points out that 'these things occurred as examples' (1 Cor. 10:6).

Psalm 106. We have sinned like our ancestors

Context

Psalm 105 remembered the past in order to highlight God's great redemptive acts on behalf of his people. Psalm 106 follows with a remembrance of the people's sinful rebellion against their God who rescues them. The psalm's content fits best with a composition during the time of the exile. The composer likens his generation's rebellion to that of generations past. He puts his hope in the fact that God saved those past generations. Perhaps he will save them as well (see commentary). While this is a song of remembrance, the psalm may also be seen as a lament, as it calls on God to save his people from their present distress.

Comment

106:1–3. Praise the Lord

The psalmist calls on the congregation to praise and thank God, appealing to God's goodness and his *love* (or loyalty; *hesed*). The psalmist will soon turn to the history of Israel and highlight times in which God demonstrated his goodness and loyalty based on his covenant with his people. The phrase *his love endures for ever* is reminiscent of the recurrent refrain in another remembrance song, Psalm 136 (also Ps. 137:1). As soon as the psalmist calls for praise, he asks a rhetorical question, indicating the impossibility of doing God full justice. God is so good and so loyal that it would not be possible to exhaust the topic. The opening concludes with a blessing on those who *act justly* and do *right*, presumably motivating such behaviour,^{[135](#)} although from the history of God's people that follows, we will learn that, while God is just and does what is right, his people do not.

106:4–5. Remember me

The psalmist expects salvation to come to his people and here requests that he participate in its benefits. He wants God to remember him at the moment of rescue. Remembrance is more than moral recall, but includes action. This section provides the first hint that matters are not right among God's people; we will learn more in what follows. The benefits of God's salvation will be prosperity and the opportunity to worship God.

106:6–12. Our ancestors sinned, but you saved them

God rescues his people in spite of their sin. He does so not for the sake of his people, but for the sake of his reputation (*name*) among the nations (v. 8). The psalmist gives an example from the past to inspire hope for the present analogous situation.

He remembers how the first generation that came out of Egypt rebelled so quickly against God, in spite of having observed the miracles of the plagues and most especially the crossing of the Re(e)d Sea. In perhaps the most remarkable of all God's rescues in the Old Testament, God had opened the waters of the sea to allow his people to escape from their slavery in Egypt, while at the same time executing judgment against their Egyptian oppressors. He recounts the crossing of the sea by personifying the waters, thus evoking the ancient cosmic myth of the conflict between the waters of chaos and the God of creation (*Enuma Elish*; *Baal Epic*; Pss 77:16–20; 114:3, 5). God rebuked the sea and it dried up, allowing the Israelites to pass through to safety. The converse of the rescue of the Hebrews is the judgment and death of the Egyptians (v. 11; Exod. 14 – 15). The Christian reader thinks of Jesus rebuking the waters, showing that he is in control of the powers of chaos (Mark 4:39).

Although God rescued his people from the oppression of the Egyptians, they quickly sinned against him. He had manifested his saving power in their midst with the plagues and the splitting of the sea, but they soon rebelled. They grumbled about the lack of fresh water (Exod. 15:22–27) and food (Exod. 16) almost immediately after crossing the sea.

But the psalmist is not just interested in the story of the exodus for antiquarian reasons. He confesses that his generation of God's people has sinned just like the first generation that came out of Egypt (v. 6).

106:13–15. They forgot

The wilderness period was a time of one rebellion after another, with God punishing the people for their lack of faith. Although God had performed great acts of deliverance on Israel's behalf, they forgot what he had done. As remembrance signifies more than an act of mental recall in the Hebrew Bible, so the act of forgetting means to ignore God. The people constantly tested God, and he sent disease among them as a punishment (see Num. 11:33–34).

106:16–23. Judgment in the wilderness

The accounts of the wilderness wandering in the Torah tell of one rebellion after another, and the psalmist reminds the congregation of this sad history, though not

following the same sequence as the narrative history.

Verses 16–18 recount the events of Numbers 16, when two lay leaders, *Dathan* and *Abiram*, along with the Levite *Korah*, rebelled against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. God responded by opening up the earth under the feet of *Dathan* and *Abiram* and then sending fire to annihilate their followers. Next, the psalmist evokes the memory of one of the most egregious sins in the wilderness. While Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving God's law, the people worshipped the golden calf (Exod. 32). So soon after the crossing of the Re(e)d Sea they were bowing before a statue that represented a false god. Verse 20 points out that the worship of the calf puts a creature in the place of the Creator (see Rom. 1:23). The only reason why God did not destroy them was because of the intercessory ministry of Moses (Exod. 32:11–14).

106:24–27. Grumbling in the wilderness

The psalmist then recalls the moment when God's patience wore out, and he condemned the first generation of Israelites who left Egypt to die in the wilderness. The straw that broke the camel's back was during the spy mission (Num. 13 – 14). The twelve spies, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, came back with a report that the land was indeed luxurious, but that fearsome warriors lived there. Rather than trusting in their Warrior God to provide the victory, they panicked. Because of their lack of trust, God decreed that they would die in the wilderness. The gesture of raising the hand accompanies a formal oath. It indicates God's intention to judge his wayward people. Verse 27 is the first strong indication that this psalm was written at the time of the exile or soon thereafter, in that it compares the exodus generation's death in the wilderness with the scattering among the nations.

106:28–33. Rebellion in the wilderness

Verses 28–31 recount Israel's sin at Shittim, narrated in Numbers 25. God refused to let Balaam, the pagan prophet, earn his stipend from Balak, king of Moab, by cursing the Israelites as they went through the region. However, Balaam found another way to get paid and devised a plan that he thought would divert the Israelites from their journey and their devotion to the true God (Num. 31:16). That plan was to send Midianite women, who would seduce the men and then get them to worship the local manifestation of the god *Baal*, identified as *of Peor*. Whether or not these women were cult prostitutes is not important to know; the men who slept with them were breaking the first and the seventh commandments. In this act, they *yoked themselves* to this false god, expressed by

a verb that makes an analogy between worshipping a foreign god and being a beast of burden. This god and the others that were connected to his worship were *lifeless* (the Hebrew is lit. ‘dead’), as opposed to the living God of Israel. God accordingly responded in anger and with *plague*.

When an Israelite man took a Midianite woman into his tent in front of Moses, *Phinehas* the priest responded quickly by taking a spear and driving it through the man and the woman with one blow while they were copulating (Num. 25:6–9). Phinehas was acting as a priest should, protecting the covenant (Deut. 33:9). God chose the Levites as the priestly tribe because they demonstrated that they were willing to use violence in protection of the holiness of God on the occasion of the sin with the golden calf (Exod. 32:27–29). Priests were the bodyguards of God’s holiness (Longman 2001: 139–150), and Phinehas acted precisely as he should, thus receiving God’s blessing of an eternal priesthood. Phinehas functioned as priest after the death of Eleazar, his father, in the period of the conquest and judges (Josh. 22:13, 30–31; Judg. 20:27–28).

The next example of rebellion in the wilderness steps back in time a bit, with a reflection on the events at a place that came to be known as *Meribah* (or ‘quarrelling’) in Numbers 20:1–13. The Israelites rebelled against God once again by grumbling about the lack of water in the wilderness. God informed Moses to speak to the rock, which would then gush with water. *Moses* brought *trouble* on himself by implicitly claiming that he and Aaron were giving them the water and then striking the rock with his staff. For this reason, Moses was not permitted to enter the Promised Land.

106:34–39. Mingling with the nations

This stanza rehearses the rebellion of the people after they entered the land. They had strict instructions to kill every person in the land (Deut. 20:16–18), the rationale being that otherwise ‘they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God’. According to the psalmist, they didn’t follow through on this divine command, and the result was as anticipated. They emulated the worship of the Canaanites, which even included child sacrifice (Deut. 18:10; 2 Kgs 16:3; 17:17; Jer. 7:30–31; Ezek. 20:31). The gods that became the object of their worship are characterized as *idols* and *false gods*. The term ‘false gods’ is often rendered ‘demons’ (see NLT; *NIDOTTE* 4: 48–49). This translation makes it clear that the idols were more than blocks of wood covered in gold; they represented evil spiritual powers. Indeed, Paul tells the Corinthians to refrain from eating meat offered to idols, because those idols are really demons (1 Cor. 10:20).

106:40–46. *He remembered his covenant*

After the conquest come the periods of the judges and monarchy, united and divided. The description in verses 40–46 fits best with the period of the judges, which is described as a series of oppressions (vv. 41–42), followed by deliverance (v. 43) in response to their cry for help (v. 44). The pattern is anticipated in Judges (Judg. 2:10 – 3:6). That said, the following periods also saw God in his anger judging his people by allowing foreign nations to oppress them.

If we are right that this psalm was composed during the period of the exile, the remembrance of this cycle of oppression, cry for help (repentance) and deliverance would provide grounds for hope of a deliverance from the exile. God's attitude and action to deliver his wayward people from their oppression spring from his covenant with his people and the *great love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) that emanates from it. Even before their deliverance, the psalmist points out that it is only because of God that they experience *mercy* from their captors (as Solomon prayed in 1 Kgs 8:33–34).

106:47. *Save us*

That the people of God are at present in distress is made abundantly clear by the psalmist's invocation and plea for help. Specifically, the psalmist asks that they be gathered from the nations. This request best fits the period of the exile. He appeals to God to deliver them on the grounds that then they would be able to worship him.

106:48. *Doxology to Book 4*

Verse 48 is not the conclusion to the psalm, but rather to Book 4 (see Introduction, p. 36).

Meaning

The psalmist, living at the time of the exile, knows that his generation is like earlier generations of Israelites in that they sin and rebel against God. He looks back on the history of his people and sees that God is loyal to his covenant and will save his people, leading to their praise for his redemption.

Christians who read this psalm today and make it their own prayer are also mindful of their sin, in spite of God's grace. We can look back over an even longer history of redemption and see God's great acts of deliverance, which include the return from exile, as narrated in Ezra-Nehemiah. However, God's greatest act of deliverance of his sinful people takes place on the cross of Christ.

Jesus' death and resurrection saves us from our enemies, sin and death, and should lead us to join the psalmist in unending worship.

BOOK 5: PSALMS 107 – 150

Psalm 107. Give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love

Context

The opening of Psalm 107 is similar to that of Psalm 106, but rather than being a lament, this psalm calls on God's people to thank him for his rescue from various forms of suffering. The main stanzas (vv. 4–9, 10–16, 17–22, 23–32) all have a similar structure. Each narrates a 'deadly threat', followed by a cry for help, and then comes God's deliverance,^[136] which elicits a call to thank and praise God (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011: 107). To develop its structure further, the psalm utilizes two refrains. After the description of the deadly threat, the first refrain describes God's people calling on him for help, followed by his positive response (*Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress*; vv. 6, 13, 19, 28). Next comes the second refrain, urging the people to respond with thanks and praise (*Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind*; vv. 8, 15, 21, 31). The final verse calls on the wise to pay attention, thus connecting the psalm to the wisdom traditions of the Old Testament.

Comment

107:1–3. A story of redemption

In an opening verse similar to the first verse of Psalm 106, the psalmist urges God's people (*the redeemed of the LORD*) to thank God. He calls on them to speak (the NIV translates this simple verb expansively as *tell their story*). The redeemed are identified as those who are gathered from the four directions (from the Promised Land), thus strongly suggesting that the psalm is addressed to those who have returned from the Babylonian exile (see *Context*). This gathering is seen as a sign that God's *love* (or covenant loyalty; *hesed*) *endures for ever* (see Ps. 106:1 and the recurrent refrain in Ps. 136).

107:4–9. Returning from the desert wasteland

The first group of those redeemed from the dispersion are those who wander in *desert wastelands*. While there may be an allusion to the wilderness wandering in the far distant past (VanGemeren 2008: 797), the psalm appears to reflect most directly on the return from Babylon, which is seen by the prophets as a second exodus and return from the wilderness (see Isa. 40:1–5; Hos. 2:14–15). They suffered from hunger and thirst, but God satisfied their needs by providing food and drink. He brought them out of the desert wastelands into a *city* (perhaps Jerusalem) where they were provided for. God redeemed them because they cried to him for help. Thus, they should give him thanks for his deliverance.

107:10–16. Out of darkness

Next, the psalmist reflects on the redemption of *prisoners* who were incarcerated in chains. While no reason was given for the suffering of those who wandered in the desert wastelands in the previous stanza, here the prisoners' difficult condition is connected to their sin against God's will (v. 11). Of course, the Old Testament consistently explains Judah's exile in Babylon as the result of their sin. Even so, when they cried to the Lord for help, God delivered them from their imprisonment, and for that the psalmist calls on God's people to give thanks to God.

107:17–22. Some became fools

The next group of those liberated by God are identified as *fools*, who became such through their rebellion against God. Like the previous group (but unlike the first), these people suffered because of their sin. Even so, once they called on God for help, he saved them from their distress. As a result, they should thank God and offer thank offerings to him.

107:23–32. Calming the storm waters

The fourth group, like the first, are not characterized as sinners, although they find themselves in life-threatening danger. They are *merchants* who transport their wares on the seas. As such, they experience storms that might capsize their ships. The psalmist attributes the power of these storms to God. Such storms tossed the ships around until these seasoned sailors lost their courage. With no other recourse, they called on God to save them, and he did so by bringing them out (hiphil of *yṣ'*) from their distress (for the different words used in this psalm for salvation, see note 1, p. 375). He calmed the storm waters. Thus, they should praise God.

107:33–38. *Desert into pools*

Human wickedness brings a divine response, as we also learn from the covenant curses (e.g. Deut. 27 – 28). God can turn habitable land into uninhabitable, in response to human sin. An example would be Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18 – 19), where God turned a *fruitful land* into a *salt waste*. On the other hand, God can also provide shelter and provision for those who need it. He can turn *parched ground into flowing springs*.

107:39–42. *Lifting the needy*

Verses 39–40 could refer to the exile in which the people were *decreased* and *humbled* by the Babylonian defeat of Jerusalem and the resultant deportation of the upper classes to exile, an act that would have poured *contempt on nobles*. While God humbles the proud, he lifts up the *needy* who suffer (see also Ps. 113). God blesses his people, but puts down those who proudly resist him. Accordingly, the upright should worship, while the wicked should be silent (v. 42).

107:43. *Be wise*

The appeal is to the *wise*, elsewhere defined as those who fear God (most notably Prov. 1:7). The loving deeds of God are those described throughout the psalm, as God rescues those in danger who call on him for help.

Meaning

By the use of four deliverance narratives and the two recurrent refrains therein (see *Context*), the psalmist calls on God's people (*the wise*, v. 43) to thank and praise God for saving them from life-threatening danger. In two of the scenes, the danger is explicitly caused by the people's sin. Even so, God saves his people when they call on him.

Christian readers of this psalm know that they are sinners who deserve death. They are also those who have called on God to help them, and because of the work of Jesus on the cross, they too are freed from sin and death. As Hossfeld and Zenger point out, verses 23–32 are particularly evocative of Jesus stilling the storm, showing that he has the divine power to calm the forces of chaos in our life (see Mark 4:35–41; Hossfeld and Zenger 2011: 111).

Psalm 108. Let your glory be over all the earth

Psalm 108 combines Psalm 57:7–11 (vv. 1–5) with Psalm 60:5–12 (vv. 6–13), with only minor changes. However, the combination produces a different tone from either of its constituent parts. While Psalm 57 is an individual lament and Psalm 60 a corporate lament, Psalm 108 is a psalm of assurance that reapplies the previous psalms to produce a prayer ‘for Yahweh’s final, eschatological “day of vengeance” when he establishes his lordship among the nations’ (Broyles 1999: 252). See the commentary at 57:7–11 and 60:5–12 for specific comments on these verses.

Psalm 109. At the right hand of the needy

Context

This individual lament uses the language of the court and suggests that it was motivated by false accusations directed at the speaker. The enemy is cruel and calculating, and the psalmist describes himself as weak and without the resources to protect himself. Accordingly, he calls on God to save him, by invoking a series of hard-hitting curses (see Introduction: Imprecations, pp. 51–52).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

109:1–5. A man of prayer

The psalmist asks God to speak and not be *silent* (Ps. 83:1) in the face of the barrage of hateful words directed at him by his enemies. He has offered them *friendship*, but they have responded with accusations. He has treated them well, but they have responded by trying to harm him (Ps. 35:12). The language fits with the courtroom, and the psalmist accuses his enemies of false charges.

109:6–15. Find him guilty

While the opening of the psalm speaks of enemies in the plural, the psalmist now directs his attention to an individual. Perhaps this person is the leader of the group. If we are correct that the original context is the courtroom, the composer could be referring to the judge or his main accuser. In any case, he calls on God to punish the culprit.^[137] The law called for a false witness to suffer the fate intended for the one falsely accused (Deut. 19:16–21), an idea that lies behind the hope that God would raise up someone who would accuse his enemy. The psalmist asks for the death of his enemy so that another would replace him in his leadership role (for the NT use of v. 8, see *Meaning*). He asks God to make not only his enemy suffer, but also his children and wife (vv. 10–15). He wants nothing less than that this person's whole family line to be blotted out (v. 15).

109:16–20. Curse him

In these verses, the poet justifies his appeal to God to curse his enemy, who, after

all, would just be receiving what he had wished on others. He gave no thought to helping others (*he found no pleasure in blessing*), so why should he be blessed (*may it be far from him*)? Cursing others was second nature to him. It was an integral part of who he was, soaking into him like water into the body, or oil into the bone. Not only was it an inward characteristic of his personality, it was demonstrable by his public behaviour (*like a cloak wrapped about him, like a belt tied for ever round him*).

109:21–29. Help me, Lord

In the face of such evil, the psalmist calls on God to help him by delivering him (vv. 21, 26). He has no resources to fend off the attacks of his accuser (*I am poor and needy*, v. 22). He expresses his fragility by comparing himself to a *shadow* that disappears once the sun sets, and a *locust* that can be shaken off (v. 23). His suffering is not just spiritual and psychological, but also physical (*my body is thin and gaunt*), so that people look at him with disgust (vv. 24–25). He appeals to God for the sake of his name, that is, God's own reputation as one who defends the defenceless (v. 21), and because of his *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) whereby he promises in his covenant to protect his people. Again, the psalmist calls down an imprecation on his accusers (linking back to v. 6), asking that those who are clothed with cursing (v. 19) finally be clothed with *disgrace* (v. 29).

109:30–31. He helps the needy

As with most laments, the poet ends on a confident note, believing that God does stand with the *needy* against those who would falsely accuse them. This realization motivates him to join the congregation to worship God.

Meaning

The psalmist opens and closes with praise for God (vv. 1, 30), even though the body of the psalm is clearly a lament in the midst of a great personal crisis where the speaker's friends have falsely accused him. He thus appeals to God to save him and bring judgment on his enemies. Even if the original setting of the psalm is the courtroom, the psalm can provide a model prayer for those being attacked by those close to them (see also Pss 35:12–16; 41:9; 55:12–14; Jer. 18:19–23).

David's greater Son Jesus found himself betrayed by his disciple Judas. He extended friendship and love to Judas, but Judas repaid him with deceit and turned him over to the authorities who killed him. Peter cites verse 8 of our psalm (*may another take his place of leadership*) in the context of the choice of

Matthias as a replacement for Judas among the Twelve (Acts 1:20). Judas fits the description of the enemy in our psalm, and he suffered the punishment which the psalmist called on the one who had betrayed him: 'With the payment he received for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out' (Acts 1:18).

Psalm 110. A priest forever

Context

Psalm 110 is a royal hymn that centres on two divine oracles (vv. 1, 4) directed to the king. While the title names David as the composer, the first verse in its original context can only be understood as an oracle from God (*the LORD*) to the king (my lord).^[138] In other words, the psalm is addressed to the king, not given by the king, although the title will allow the New Testament authors to apply the psalm in a different direction (see *Meaning*). Recent research comparing Psalm 110 with Assyrian royal prophecies suggests that ‘Psalm 110 was delivered at the temple by a prophet, possibly a temple functionary, as part of Israel’s cultus and pertains to the newly minted king.’^[139]

The psalm anticipates the king’s military victory over his enemies and announces that this warrior-king will also be a priest, not in the line of Aaron, but in the order of Melchizedek (see commentary). While the psalm may be a coronation psalm like Psalm 2, it might also have found use as a pre-battle hymn.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

110:1. Sit at my right hand

The psalm begins with a prophetic oracle addressed by God to the king (see *Context*) that God, envisioned here as a Warrior, will subdue the king’s enemies. To sit at God’s *right hand* is symbolic of a position of honour and power. God is the ultimate King, and the human king is his agent on earth. The picture of the enemies as the king’s footstool points to the king’s dominance and control and the enemies’ humiliation.

110:2–3. Extending the king’s rule

Through his warring activity, God will extend the king’s rule (represented by his *sceptre*) from *Zion*, the location of the temple and the place where God made his presence known among his people, into the heart of the enemy’s land. The king’s army will be eager and prepared for the battle, as is proper for those engaged in God’s human army (Deut. 20:1–9). As *dew* appears suddenly and mysteriously

in the morning, so will the king's army. Dew, in a dry land like Israel, may also denote the vigour and freshness of the young soldiers.

110:4. In the order of Melchizedek

In a surprising twist in a psalm that has focused on the king as a warrior, the Lord now issues a second decree proclaiming that the king will be a *priest for ever*. The announcement is enigmatic in that other texts suggest that kings should not infringe on priestly duties (1 Sam. 13:8–15),^[140] even though it is true that David, the putative composer of the psalm, occasionally acted like a priest (2 Sam. 6) and his sons are called priests (2 Sam. 8:18). Perhaps it is because kings were not permitted priestly prerogatives in Israel that the composer cites *Melchizedek* rather than Aaron as the founder of the king's priestly order. Citing Melchizedek evokes the story in Genesis 14, in the aftermath of Abraham's successful battle against the four kings of the east. Melchizedek is introduced as the priest-king of Salem (probably an earlier name for Jerusalem) to whom Abraham gives a tenth of the spoils. Thus, Melchizedek, rather than Aaron, offers a model for the combination of the royal and priestly offices.

110:5–7. At God's right hand

In the first verse, the king was described as sitting at God's right hand; now God (*the Lord*) is at the king's right hand, protecting him and fighting on his behalf, with the result that the king will have victory over the kings of earth (see also Ps. 2). This battle is not for imperialistic purposes, but rather a matter of judgment on those who will perish in battle. The picture of drinking from the *brook* shows that, although the work will be hard, there will be refreshment along the way,^[141] and victory at the end (*he will lift his head high*).

Meaning

Above, we have presented Psalm 110 as a royal hymn that found its original use as a coronation or perhaps a pre-battle song. We have noted many unusual elements in the psalm (such as the title's relationship to the speaker; the proclamation that the king would be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek). There is also the anticipation that the king would have a worldwide victory over all the other kings of the earth (like Ps. 2). All of these features led to an eschatological interpretation, particularly after the fall of the monarchy in the intertestamental period. The authors of the New Testament recognize that this psalm finds its ultimate fulfilment in Jesus Christ. They read the psalm as if David is the prophetic voice that communicates the Lord's oracle

concerning David's Lord, the eschatological Messiah, Jesus.

The first oracle (*Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet*, v. 1) is cited in contexts that indicate Jesus' post-resurrection glory in reference to the conflict between God and the spiritual powers (Acts 2:34–35; 1 Cor. 15:25; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:13; 1 Pet. 3:22). Jesus also cites this verse in Matthew 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 20:41–44, where he argues that the Messiah is superior to David, rather than subordinate as the Pharisees believed. Jesus uses contemporary hermeneutical principles to make his point (haggadic interpretation), since the original audience would understand this passage as an oracle of God to David. The fact that the title names this psalm as a composition of David would lend credence to Jesus' reading (see the helpful discussion in Broyles 1999: 415–416). The second oracle is cited by the author of Hebrews in his presentation of Jesus as the ultimate high priest (*You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek*, v. 4; see Heb. 5:6; 7:17). In Hebrews 8:1 and 10:12–14, the author combines the two oracles of the psalm to speak of Jesus as the high priest who is seated at God's right hand. Hebrews uses Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 to argue that Jesus is the ultimate high priest, even greater than Aaron.

Psalm 111. I will extol the Lord with all my heart

Context

Psalm 111 demonstrates that the various types of psalms are not watertight categories. This psalm has hymnic elements, as well as features of a thanksgiving psalm, but clearly uses concepts and terminology connected to the wisdom tradition (see especially vv. 5 and 10 on the ‘fear of the LORD’), as well to legal traditions, as seen in its reflections on how the precepts of the Lord bring understanding. In addition, there is the evocation of the great acts of God, especially related to his acts of redemption. The psalmist is either a worship leader directing praise in the great assembly or a teacher speaking in a school. Verse 1 strongly suggests the former, but perhaps we should not make too clear a distinction in terms of its ancient use. The psalm is an acrostic, each colon beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, thereby giving a sense of order and complete coverage of the topic. For its close relationship with Psalm 112, see *Context* there.

Comment

111:1. Praise the Lord

The psalm begins with a call to praise God, along with a statement of the psalmist’s (the worship leader’s) intention to do just that in the assembly of God’s people (*the council of the upright and in the assembly*). He holds nothing back from his worship (*with all my heart*).

111:2–5. Great are his works

The worship leader begins by declaring God’s works to be great. Although specific acts are not mentioned, many are described in the historical books of the Old Testament that recount the times when God intervened on behalf of his people to save them from their enemies. Perhaps none is as outstanding as the exodus from Egypt.

God’s acts demonstrate his *righteousness*, because they show he is on the side of those who are his people and against their evil oppressors. It is not that his people deserve this treatment; they are acts of his grace and compassion, characteristics often associated with God (Exod. 34:6; Neh. 9:17; Pss 86:15;

103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13). As part of his grace and compassion, verse 5 says that he gives *food for those who fear him*.^[142] Perhaps this is a reference to the provision of food in the wilderness wandering (Exod. 16; Num. 11), but if so, he provided food not just for those who feared him, but also for those who grumbled against him. Those who fear God recognize their proper place in his creation. He is the Creator and they are his creatures. This is not the type of fear that makes someone run away in horror, but it is more than respect. Perhaps the English word ‘awe’ captures the sense of the Hebrew best. In any case, the expression ‘fear of the LORD’ is well known from the book of Proverbs, where it is described as the beginning of wisdom (1:7; 9:10, etc.; see also v. 10 of this psalm), and other wisdom books (most notably Job 28:28; Eccl. 12:13). The blessings of the covenant include the provision of food for those who follow God (Deut. 28:4–5).

111:6–9. Conquest and covenant

The people have seen demonstrations of God’s power in his acts, specifically in the conquest, in which he *gave them the lands of other nations* (Josh. 1 – 12). By the power of God, they defeated nations that were much stronger and more numerous than they were (Deut. 11:23).

Verses 7–8 speak of God’s laws (*precepts*) that he gave them at Mount Sinai after the exodus from Egypt and before the conquest of the Promised Land. As Psalm 119 will repeatedly state in similar terms, God’s law is trustworthy, faithful and upright. It is part of the *covenant* that God established through Moses (Exod. 19 – 24).

111:10. Fear of the Lord

The psalm concludes with the pronouncement that the *fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom* (see comments on v. 5 above). Wisdom demonstrates itself through following God’s law (*precepts*), because it imparts understanding about the world and how to live in it. As a result of God’s great acts and his insightful precepts, he deserves unending praise.

Meaning

The psalmist calls on those who fear the Lord to praise God for his great acts of redemption. He subtly alludes to the exodus, wilderness wandering and conquest as examples of God’s redemptive acts, as well as his giving of the law (v. 7).

The Christian knows even more fully that God has *provided redemption for his people* (v. 9), because we live after the coming of Jesus, who himself reflects

God and his character as described in the psalm, and his death and resurrection bring his people redemption from sin, guilt and death.

Psalm 112. Blessed are those who fear the Lord

Context

This wisdom psalm reflects on the blessings on the person who fears the Lord. In this respect, Psalm 112 is similar to Psalm 1, and it is interesting to note that both acrostic psalms begin with *blessed* ('*ašrê*) and conclude with the verb *tō'bēd* (*will come to nothing*).^[143] The gender-neutral translation of the NIV and many other modern translations is justified, since most of the traits described are relevant to both men and women, but we should not lose sight of the fact that the psalm in its ancient setting had males predominantly in mind (see below on relationship with Prov. 31:10–31).

Like the preceding psalm, this one is also an acrostic in which every colon begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, again indicating order and complete coverage of the topic. As the commentary that follows will show, the description of the godly person in Psalm 111 and God himself in Psalm 112 has connections. The godly person reflects the character of God. In addition, the godly man in Psalm 112 sounds in part at least like the godly woman in Proverbs 31:10–31.

Comment

112:1. Praise the Lord

After an opening call for the congregation to worship God, the psalmist confers a blessing on the wise person (similar to the opening of Ps. 1), defined as *those who fear the LORD* (see commentary at 111:5 and 10). Those who fear God will not only pay attention to God's law (*commands*), but will delight in it (see Ps. 1), because they know it expresses his will and his best for his people as they live in the world that he created. In addition, one who fears God will have no room to fear other people or situations. The noble woman in Proverbs 31 is one who is to be praised because she 'fears the LORD' (v. 30).

112:2–5. Prosperity for the wise

The second stanza begins by specifying the blessing that will come on those who fear God. They will be blessed with material resources and with a strong and influential family. These are the types of blessings described in Deuteronomy 28

that will come to those who obey God:

You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country.

The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock – the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.

Your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.

You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out.

(vv. 3–6)

Furthermore, they will not waver in their relationship with God (*their righteousness endures for ever*); indeed, in this they are like God himself (Ps. 111:3). And also like God, they are *gracious and compassionate* (Ps. 111:4). The wise distribute their resources to those who need them, just as God himself distributed food to those who fear him (Ps. 111:5), and as the woman of ‘noble character’ opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy (Prov. 31:20). The wise person should also lend to those in need without charging interest (Exod. 22:25–27; Deut. 15:1–7; Prov. 11:24–26).

112:6–9. Their hearts are secure

The third stanza recognizes that life is full of potential pitfalls and threats. Even so, the wise person (here characterized again as *righteous*) will face the world with full confidence because of his steadfast relationship with God. As stated above, fear of God leaves no room for fear of anything or anyone else. Like the noble woman of Proverbs, the righteous will even face bad news with trust in God (v. 7; cf. Prov. 31:25b: ‘she can laugh at the days to come’). Their foes will be vanquished and they will live in triumph. Their *horn* (an image of power and dignity) will be lifted up.

112:10. The wicked gnash their teeth

Wicked people live under the illusion that they can oppress and exploit others. They desire material gain, power and status. The message of this psalm is that the blessings of the righteous will anger and frustrate the wicked (implied by their gnashing teeth).

Meaning

Psalm 112 describes the godly man, presenting a picture of him that is a reflection of God himself, as described in Psalm 111, its companion psalm, and related to the picture of the ‘noble woman’ in Proverbs 31:20–31. Jesus is the perfect expression of the godly man as described in this psalm.

Paul cites verse 9 of our psalm in 2 Corinthians 9:9 in reference to his

collection for the poor. He uses the psalm to remind his hearers that the godly person is generous, and thus he exhorts his hearers to give to the needy among them.

Psalm 113. He raises the poor from the dust

Context

This untitled psalm is a hymn that celebrates the sovereign God's involvement with his creation, indeed with the most vulnerable of his human creatures, the needy and the childless woman. Jewish tradition recognizes Psalm 113 as the first of the Egyptian Hallel psalms (113 – 118), in which the first two (113 – 114) were sung before the Passover meal and the rest afterwards.

Comment

113:1–3. Praise the Lord

The psalmist calls on all God's servants to praise him. *The name of the LORD signifies his reputation, won by his great actions and wonderful character. His worship should be unending* (both now and for evermore) and universal (*from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets*).

113:4–6. Who is like the Lord?

God is greater than anything; his *glory* transcends even the heavens, not to mention the earth. The psalmist asks a rhetorical question (*Who is like the LORD our God?*; see also Exod. 15:11; Deut. 3:24; Ps. 35:10; Isa. 40:18, 25; 46:5) to emphasize God's incomparable nature as both transcendent, but also immanent. He is other than his creation, but he remains involved with it. Other gods are either totally other than creation and uninvolved, or identify with and participate in creation. God's kingly *throne* is in heaven, but he concerns himself with his creation. The verb 'to stoop down' indicates his greatness and willingness to condescend on behalf of his creatures, both heavenly and earthly.

113:7–9. He helps the vulnerable

The final stanza highlights ways in which the transcendent God of the universe stoops down to the earth. He helps the vulnerable. He comes to the aid of the poor and raises them from their lowly estate. God himself is seated 'on high' (v. 5), and he raises the poor from their abject position. God does not favour the rich and famous. He makes the last to be first, as he raises the lowly to high position. He also comes to the aid of barren women by opening their wombs to

provide them with children. In ancient Israel, a childless woman was vulnerable, and her plight led to despair, as illustrated by Rachel's appeal to Jacob: 'Give me children, or I'll die!' (Gen. 30:1), and her relief when she gave birth: 'God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son' (Gen. 30:6). The psalm comes to a close as it opened, praising God.

Meaning

Psalm 113 calls on the congregation to praise God for being a glorious and transcendent God, who remains involved in the life of his people. In particular, this psalm gives hope to the socially vulnerable, the poor and the childless woman. In terms of the latter, the Old Testament narratives are full of stories of God opening the wombs of barren women: Sarah (Gen. 11:30; 21:1–5), Rebekah (25:21), Rachel (30:22), Samson's mother (Judg. 13:2–3), Hannah (1 Sam. 1:2), the Shunammite (2 Kgs 4:16), Elizabeth (Luke 1:7). Of these, the story of Hannah deserves special mention, because, after she gives birth to Samuel, she sings praises God in a song that shares a number of elements with Psalm 113 (1 Sam. 2:1–10). Turning to the New Testament, we, of course, read the story of the most famous birth of all, that of Jesus. Mary was not barren; she was a virgin. Even so, God opened her womb to give birth to the Saviour of the world, and she responded with a song that celebrated the One who 'has lifted up the humble' (Luke 1:52; see 1:46–55). As part of the Egyptian Hallel, this psalm would have been sung by Jesus and his disciples during their last Passover meal together (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26).

Psalm 114. When Israel came out of Egypt

Context

This psalm, with its focus on the exodus, is the second of the Egyptian Hallel sung before the Passover meal, according to Jewish tradition. The psalmist celebrates God's victory over Egypt, provision in the wilderness and entry into the Promised Land. The use of poetic personification gives vibrancy to this remembrance of these historical events and also evokes memory of the ancient combat between God and the waters of chaos.

Comment

114:1–2. God's sanctuary

The psalm takes us back to the beginning of Israel as a nation and calls to mind the Israelites' rescue from Egyptian bondage. As they entered the Promised Land, God transformed it into a holy place (*God's sanctuary/his dominion*). God made his presence known in a special way among the nations. This language is similar to that of Exodus 19:5–6, where God announces, 'Out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

114:3–6. Sea and mountains

The poet then personifies the waters of the Re(e)d Sea (*the sea*) and the *Jordan* River, both of which divided in response to God's appearance (symbolized by Moses' rod at the sea [Exod. 14] and the ark of the covenant at the crossing of the Jordan River [Josh. 4:18]). By personifying the sea and the river and picturing them in full retreat, it evokes the ancient symbolism of the waters of chaos and evil that the Creator God subdues and controls.

The *mountains* and *hills* of the Promised Land are pictured as gambolling like animals of the flock. The psalmist provocatively asks the question, *Why?* Why did the sea and the river flee and the mountains and hills leap? The answer is obvious, and it will become explicit in the next stanza.

114:7–8. God's fearsome presence

Why did the sea and river flee and the mountains and hills leap? It was not

because of Israel; it was because of the appearance of the God of the universe, the Lord himself. Thus, the psalmist calls on the earth to *tremble* (thus demonstrating their fear of the Lord) at the presence of the One who makes the waters flee and the mountains leap. He adds yet another demonstration of God's power and provision for his people: when God brought water out of a rock (Exod. 17:1–7; Num. 20:1–13).

Meaning

The psalm celebrates God's deliverance from bondage in Egypt, his provision during the wilderness wanderings, and Israel's entry into the Promised Land. It calls on all the earth to tremble before the One who can do such marvellous acts and reminds its hearers that Israel is not just a nation like other nations, but a holy place because of God's presence in their midst.

That Jesus' life and ministry follow the pattern of the exodus, wilderness wandering and conquest reminds us that, just as Israel looked to their past for hope, we are to look to the death and resurrection of our Passover Lamb for the confidence to live in an uncertain present. Just as Israel was God's sanctuary among the nations, so, because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst, the church serves that function today (see Eph. 3:9–12).

Psalm 115. Trust in the Lord

Context

In this communal song of confidence, a worship leader exhorts the congregation to put their trust in the true God, rather than acting like the nations that worship false deities, represented by metallic statues. As pointed out in the *Comment* section, there are subtle indications that this song was used to engender trust in the midst of a military crisis. The psalm found use as part of the Passover liturgy, being sung along with other members of the Egyptian Hallel (Pss 113 – 114) before the meal (see *Context* of Ps. 113). Stylistically, we should note the importance of repetition in the psalm, which creates an emphasis on those elements, and we will point them out in the following analysis.

Comment

115:1. Glory to God

The worship leader directs the congregation to focus on God and not on themselves. The repetition of *not to us* is for emphasis and signals just how hard it is for us to diminish our own accomplishments and give the praise to the One to whom it belongs. God's *love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) and *faithfulness* are marks of his covenant with Israel and show that he is reliable. The appeal to God's glory, demonstrated by his love and faithfulness, may signal that this psalm is spoken in a moment of crisis.

115:2–8. God against the idols

Israel's God is vastly different from the gods of the nations. Even so, Israel's history demonstrates that God's people were constantly tempted and sometimes succumbed to the worship of these false gods. The nations' question: *Where is their God?* is motivated by the fact that the Lord had no idol who represented his presence. If we are right that the psalm is uttered in the context of a crisis, it may be that the nations are threatening Israel and taunting them that their God is not making his presence known.

The worship leader responds by pointing out the obvious: *Our God is in heaven*. Not only that, he is sovereign and free: *he does whatever pleases him*. The counter charge is that the gods of the nations are made by humans. They are

represented by idols that look like humans. They have mouths, eyes, ears, noses, hands and feet, but they cannot speak, see, hear, smell, feel or walk. The psalmist then reminds his hearers that those who make idols and put their confidence in them will be like them, the living dead. The prophets similarly attack false worship with biting sarcasm (Isa. 40:18–20; 41:7, 29; 44:6–23; 46:5–7; Jer. 10:1–5).

115:9–11. *Trust the Lord*

Next, the worship leader exhorts his congregation to *trust in the LORD*, because he protects them. The call to trust God is emphasized by a threefold repetition, as is God's role as Protector, since three times he is called *their help and shield*. The *shield* is, of course, a metaphor drawn from the military, and may suggest that the psalmist has in mind God's role as a Warrior who will protect them against those idol-worshipping nations who mock Israel. If so, the word *help* might be taken more in the sense of 'ally'. God fights for them against their enemies. He calls first on all Israel (*you Israelites*) to trust God, followed by an appeal especially to the priests who are descendants of Aaron (*house of Aaron*). Those who *fear* God, and thus acknowledge God's primacy in his creation and their own subservience, would include both groups.

115:12–13. *He will bless us*

The three groups directly exhorted to trust God are now told why they should do so. He remembers and blesses them. To remember means more than just being mentally aware of them; it implies action on their behalf. God created humanity in a blessed condition, so to understand what it means for him to bless them (emphasized by a fourfold repetition of the verb bless [*brk*]), we might think of the Garden of Eden, where humanity's relationship with God and with each other was harmonious and their material needs were met. The same understanding of blessing can be reached by reading a list of the blessings of the covenant (i.e. Deut. 28:1–14). God does not favour the powerful and rich over the disenfranchized and the poor, or vice versa. All may put their confidence in him.

115:14–15. *May God bless you*

The worship leader expresses his wish that God will indeed bless them. By referring to him as *the Maker of heaven and earth*, he reminds the congregation that God has unlimited resources to do so. The blessing extends beyond the present to future generations.

115:16–17. Praise God

Although God made the heavens and the earth, he created the earth for humanity. He has already made it abundantly clear that, although the earth is the realm of human life, he is passionately involved with humans. In other words, the worship leader is not making the same point as the Teacher who says, ‘God is in heaven and you are on earth...so let your words be few’ (Eccl. 5:2). Indeed, just the opposite. He urges them to engage in enthusiastic praise of God while they are still alive, offering God the glory announced in verse 1.^{[144](#)}

Meaning

The psalmist calls on Israel to place their trust in God in the midst of a crisis, probably a military attack. He reminds them that God is not like the lifeless idols of the nations, but that he will remember his covenant and bless his people.

The psalm reminds Christian readers to put their confidence in God in the midst of life’s crises. To trust in anything else is to trust in an idol, whether that idol is a false god, money, power, wisdom or relationships.

Psalm 116. He heard my voice

Context

The psalmist thanks God for saving him from a life-threatening crisis. He offers his verbal praise and expresses his intention to demonstrate his gratitude concretely by paying his vows and presenting a thank-offering at the sanctuary. The psalm found use as part of the Passover liturgy, and was sung along with other members of the Egyptian Hallel (Pss 113 – 114) before the meal (see *Context* of Ps. 113).

Comment

116:1–2. He heard me

The psalmist expresses his joy that God responded to his earlier prayer asking for help. God has thus shown that he is reliable in the midst of crisis, so the psalmist will continue to pray to him.

116:3–4. Save me from death

He recalls the crisis that caused him to turn to God for help. As in Psalm 18:4–5, the psalmist describes the threat to his life by picturing *cords* used by death as a weapon in order to pull him into the grave. The exact threat to his life is not given (and thus this psalm can be used by other worshippers in a variety of life-threatening situations). He could have been gravely ill or threatened by enemies on the battlefield or elsewhere. However, no matter what the threat, he knew where to turn, for he tells the congregation that he called out to the Lord to save him.

116:5–6. God protects the unwary

God responded to his cry for mercy (*taḥnûnāy*, v. 1), thus expressing his character as *gracious* (*ḥannûn*), *righteous* and *full of compassion* (see comment on Ps. 111:2–5). He takes care of the *unwary*, a word well known in the book of Proverbs which could be translated as ‘simple-minded’, ‘naïve’ or ‘immature’ (Prov. 1:4, 32; 9:16–18). Here it is probably used to denote humility.

116:7–9. God saved me from death

The psalmist's situation had given him tremendous anxiety and sadness (v. 3), and now he exhorts himself (*my soul*) to rest in God. The threat has passed, thanks to God, who has delivered him from impending death. The psalmist will continue to live (*walk*) in *the land of the living*, and he will do so mindful of the presence of God.

116:10–11. *Trust in God*

Even when he was in the midst of his crisis, the psalmist trusted that God would help him. On the other hand, he found no help or reason to trust his fellow human beings. It is not clear why he charges them with lying – perhaps they told him he would die or they were bringing false charges against him.

116:12–14. *Cup of salvation*

He again addresses himself (see v. 7) to ask how he will express his gratitude to God for saving him from death. He begins by saying that he will lift *the cup of salvation* and call on God's name. One may question whether the cup is metaphorical or literal, since this is the only place where it is mentioned in the Old Testament. If literal, it is referring to some kind of drink offering, which was carried out according to a regular schedule (Exod. 29:40–41; Num. 28:5–9), as well as part of a burnt or peace offering (Num. 15:1–15). But nowhere is this called the cup of salvation, although in favour of this understanding is the fact that it occurs in connection with vows and then later a thank-offering that is clearly a literal offering (see vv. 17–19). In support of a more metaphorical understanding, the cup of salvation seems to be the antithesis of the cup of God's wrath, which is clearly metaphorical and often found in the prophetic literature (Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:15–38). The psalmist's determination to fulfil his vows indicates that he must have made a vow to God contingent on God's saving him from his life-threatening situation.

116:15–16. *Costly is the death of God's servants*

As translated by the NIV, verse 15 seems strange and out of context, appearing to say that God delights in the death of his faithful servants. After all, the psalmist is thanking God for preserving him from death. The NAB and NJB seem to get it right, translating *yāqār* as 'costly', rather than *precious*. In other words, the death of his faithful servants pains God. The psalmist is one of God's faithful servants, and God had just saved him from death. He has freed him from chains, probably to be understood metaphorically in connection with the threat of death that held him.

116:17–19. Vows and thank-offerings

The psalmist asserts his intention to show his gratitude concretely in the sanctuary (the courts of the house of the Lord) through rituals. He will fulfil his vows (see also v. 14) and make thank-offerings (Lev. 7:12–15).

Meaning

The psalmist thanks God for saving him from death and commits himself to paying his vows and offering a thank-offering in the sanctuary. If one reads the psalm as a prayer of Jesus, it brings to mind the Garden of Gethsemane, where he anxiously pleaded with God to ‘take this cup [representing his coming death] from me’ (Luke 22:42). An angel came to strengthen and encourage him in preparation for his coming death. Even though Christ died on the cross, God delivered him from death through the resurrection.

According to Paul, Jesus’ resurrection is a victory over death. Death has lost its sting (1 Cor. 15:55–57), since Jesus is the ‘firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep’ (1 Cor. 15:20). We will be raised in Christ. Even so, death retains its horror. ‘To live,’ according to Paul, ‘is Christ’ (Phil. 1:21). Thus, Christians do not have a death wish. We understand the psalmist’s joy at being saved from the grave and would share that joy if we were in a similar situation. Indeed, Paul says that he lived in the face of death, but, quoting verse 10 of our psalm, he asserts that he had the same kind of faith that the psalmist demonstrated because of his belief in God. That said, in Christ, we have a deeper understanding of the afterlife and agree with Paul in his statement regarding eternal life in God’s presence that ‘to die is gain’ (Phil. 1:21).

Psalm 117. Great is his love towards us

Psalm 117 is the shortest of all the songs of the book, indeed, the shortest chapter in the Bible. The psalm found use as part of the Passover liturgy, being sung along with other members of the Egyptian Hallel (Pss 113 – 114) before the meal (see *Context* of Ps. 113).

This hymn calls on everyone (*nations/peoples*) to worship the Lord who demonstrates perpetual *love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) and *faithfulness* towards his people, divine characteristics promised by the covenant and applied here to all people on earth. During the Old Testament period, we hear of a few people from the nations (e.g. Ruth, Naaman, Uriah the Hittite) who joined Israel in their praise of God. In the New Testament, the Gentiles join the Jewish people in their praise of God through Jesus Christ. Speaking of Jesus, Paul says,

God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
(*Phil. 2:9–11*)

Indeed, Paul cites the first verse of this psalm (see Rom. 15:11) along with three other passages from the Old Testament (2 Sam. 22:50/Ps. 18:49; Deut. 32:43 [LXX]; Isa. 10:1, 19 [LXX]) to urge Jewish Christians to accept the inclusion of the Gentiles.

Psalm 118. The stone the builders rejected

Context

The psalm opens with the speaker calling on the congregation to join him in thanking God (vv. 1–4). He then goes on to relate the occasion that leads him to worship. He had been surrounded by enemies, and God had aided him in destroying them. The interaction between the individual psalmist and the congregation is easy to explain if the psalmist is a leader of a group that has been saved. He thanks God for saving him, but his rescue is in the context of the rescue of the group. It is possible, but not necessary, to think of the psalmist as the king or the head of the army. The worship takes the form of a procession to the sanctuary. In the final analysis, it is best to see this as a corporate thanksgiving, although an individual leads in expressing gratitude on behalf of himself and the whole congregation.

The psalm is the final song in the Egyptian Hallel (see *Context* of Ps. 113), traditionally sung during Passover in celebration of the exodus. Perhaps this reflects a reading of the psalm that sees the deliverance as that from Egyptian bondage which freed Israel from their enemies and brought them eventually to the altar at the temple at Mount Zion.

Comment

118:1–4. His love endures for ever

The psalmist calls the congregation to grateful praise on the basis of his enduring love (or loyalty; *hesed*), an opening similar to that found in Psalm 136. He then calls on *Israel*, then the priests (*the house of Aaron*) and the rest of God's people (*those who fear the LORD*) to affirm the truth of his enduring love (see also Ps. 115:9–13 for this tripartite division of the congregation).

118:5–7. The Lord is with me

The psalmist now looks to the past to explain why he has special reason to offer thanks to God. At first, he speaks in general terms. He was *hard pressed*, but God brought him into a *spacious place*. Verses 6b and 7b indicate that his difficult situation was caused by human enemies, almost certainly in a battle. With God, the Divine Warrior, on his side, no human could hurt him. That God

is with him indicates that he is in covenant relationship with God.

118:8–14. *Take refuge in God*

Verses 8 and 9 form an interesting staircase parallelism, where the first cola are identical, but the second cola are different. The point of both is that God provides better protection than human allies (Ps. 146:3), even if they are powerful *princes*. His enemies were as numerous, pernicious and dangerous as a hive of *bees*. But he fought in the name of the Lord and destroyed them. The threefold refrain (*I cut them down* ¹⁴⁵) indicates his complete military success, thanks to God and despite being at a disadvantage.

118:15–21. *The Lord's right hand*

God's help in battle leads the righteous to rejoice. Verses 15c–16 quote their praise for God's *right hand* (repeated three times), which often intimates his battle power (Exod. 15:6, 12; Ps. 17:6–9; Isa. 41:10). The *mighty things* are specifically his victory on behalf of his people.

In particular, the psalmist celebrates his own survival in battle (*I will not die but live*). He recognizes that his difficulty was the result of his own sin, which led to God's chastening (v. 18), but God restrained his punishment. Thus, the psalmist determines to praise God ([*I will proclaim what the LORD has done*, v. 17b). According to verses 19–20, he will do this publicly at the temple. While the temple is not explicitly mentioned, it is implied by the reference to *the gate of the LORD*, through which the righteous may enter. (Pss 15 and 24 are entrance liturgies and assert that only the righteous can enter the holy precincts.)

118:22–24. *The cornerstone*

When the people were hard-pressed, they were like a *stone the builders rejected*, useless and cast off. But through God's intervention, they are now like the *cornerstone*, the most important stone in the building. According to Hilber, 'special care was taken to select a larger and well-cut stone in order to stabilize the intersection of two walls at a corner (Job 38:6; Isa. 28:16)' (Hilber 2009: 422).

118:25. *Save us!*

Although this psalm is a thanksgiving song that looks to God's saving intervention in the past, the composer still appeals to God to maintain his saving presence with them.

118:26–27. *He who comes in the name of the Lord*

Those who make a celebratory pilgrimage to the temple's altar will be blessed. God will make his *light* shine on them (cf. the priestly benediction, particularly Num. 6:25), indicating life and everything associated with it. Their end point is the sacrificial *altar* with the four *horns* protruding on the corners (Exod. 27:1–8), implying that they are coming not just with their words of praise, but with their thanksgiving offerings. As the NIV marginal note indicates (and the vast variation among modern English translations), the second parallel line of verse 27 is difficult. If the translation in the text is correct, then the worship procession approaches the altar with *boughs* in hand (connecting to the Feast of Booths; *m. Sukkah* 3:4; Lev. 23:4). However, 'bough' is an unlikely translation, and most modern scholars believe that the marginal reading ('Bind the festal sacrifice with ropes/and take it') is closer to the original intent. If so, then we have an explicit mention of an offering. The animal would have been bound until it reached the altar, not bound on top of the altar with ropes connected to the horns, a practice for which there is neither evidence nor necessity, since by that time the animal would have been slaughtered.

118:28–29. *His love endures for ever*

Because of God's gracious actions towards him, the psalmist reaffirms his covenantal commitment to God and, giving the psalm a sense of closure, reiterates his opening statement, calling on the congregation to give thanks to God who is good and whose *love* [or loyalty; *hesed*] *endures for ever*.

Meaning

Psalm 118 is a corporate thanksgiving that celebrates a military victory. The worship eventuates in a religious procession to the temple and specifically the altar. As mentioned in the *Context*, the psalm came to be used as part of the Passover liturgy, thus connecting its contents to the exodus from Egypt. Perhaps this connection explains its widespread use in the Gospels as an anticipation of Jesus, who is the fulfilment of the exodus event.

The Gospels quote the psalm in their narration of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, after which he enters the temple precincts. The people greet him by citing verses 25–26 of our psalm, recognizing him as the One who 'comes in the name of the Lord' (Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9–10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13). This praise is repeated by the children in the temple courts (Matt. 21:15).

Jesus cites verses 22–23 in the parable of the tenants, which he relates to the temple authorities at this time (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10–11; Luke 20:17). He

challenges these authorities by comparing them to tenants who reject the owner's servants (standing for the prophets) who come to collect the rent, and ultimately reject and kill the owner's son (Jesus himself). Citing Psalm 118:22–23, Jesus is the rejected stone who has become the cornerstone. God has accomplished this transformation (by the resurrection). Thus the tenants (the temple authorities) will lose the vineyard (the kingdom of God).

Jesus cites Psalm 118:26 one last time at the end of his seven woes on the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, anticipating their judgment. However, as Hossfeld and Zenger indicate, the citation of Psalm 118 at the end ('For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"', Matt. 23:39) is a message of hope for Israel's restoration (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011: 245).

Peter also uses Psalm 118 (v. 22) in a messianic sense, in reference to the crucifixion ('the stone you builders rejected') and resurrection ('has become the cornerstone', Acts 4:11; see also 1 Pet. 2:7).

Psalm 119. I love your law

Context

Psalm 119 is most notable for its length, leading to its nickname ‘the giant psalm’, and for the fact that it is an acrostic (see Introduction, p. 46). The psalm is composed of twenty-two stanzas of eight verses. Each of the eight verses of a stanza start with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, as the poet works his way from the beginning (*aleph*) to the end (*taw*). The acrostic form gives a sense of completion and totality, and to be sure, by the end of the psalm, one feels that the poet has indeed fully covered his subject.

That subject is the law of God, and the poet pulls out all the stops as he speaks about it, including his use of vocabulary. He refers to God’s law with eight different Hebrew words (*tôrâ* [law], ‘*ēdâ* [statute], *piqqûd* [precept], *hōq* [decree], *mišwâ* [command], *mišpāṭ* [judgment ¹⁴⁶], *dābār* [word], and ‘*imrâ* [word/promise]). Perhaps these eight words explain why there are eight lines in each stanza, although only five of the stanzas employ all eight words. No stanza uses fewer than six of these words.

Psalm 119, a wisdom song, is most like Psalms 1 and 19 which also extol the law of God and encourage its study.

Comment

119:1–8. *Aleph*. The giant psalm begins with a blessing (like Pss 1 and 112, two other acrostic wisdom psalms) on those who obey God’s law. Using the language of wisdom literature, the psalmist confers happiness on those who walk in the ways of God (vv. 1a, 3b).¹⁴⁷ Such people are *blameless*, like Job (1:1). To walk in God’s ways means obeying his laws. The psalmist connects his honour to such obedience (v. 6).¹⁴⁸ He also connects God’s presence in his life with his adherence to God’s law (v. 8).

119:9–16. *Beth*. The second stanza is the only one to open with a question. The psalmist asks how a young person might stay on the path of purity. Perhaps this question reveals that the psalmist himself is a young man.¹⁴⁹ The image of the path representing the course of one’s life is familiar from wisdom literature. There are two paths: the wise path and the foolish path. The former is obviously the path of purity. Wisdom is primarily addressed to the young who are making fundamental life choices, but the issue, of course, remains relevant for all people. The question is asked in the first colon and answered clearly in the second: one

keeps on the path of purity by obeying God's word. In verses 10–11, the psalmist then enlists God's help to stay committed to God's word and asserts that he has already deeply absorbed that word (*I have hidden your word in my heart*). He rejoices in God's law, wants to learn more of it from him and states his intention to study it diligently.

119:17–24. Gimel. The psalmist appeals to God to be good to him, with the result that the conditions will be right so that he can obey God's word. He asks God to illumine his understanding of the law. His sole desire is to know and obey God's law, in spite of the scorn and contempt that he receives from others, even powerful rulers.

119:25–32. Daleth. The psalmist here reveals that he struggles with life. Being *laid low in the dust* indicates some kind of suffering, and he calls on God to save him on the basis of God's word. Of course, the law states that those who obey God will live and prosper, while those who do not will suffer (Deut. 27 – 28). The psalmist calls again for increased understanding of the law (vv. 26–27). Verse 28 once more registers present pain, and he calls on God to help him on the basis of his word. The final three verses of the stanza are ringing affirmations of his obedience to God's law.

119:33–40. He. The poet again asks for instruction in God's law (here, *decrees*) and then voices his commitment to observe it fastidiously (v. 33). As the NIV footnote makes clear, it is uncertain whether the psalmist is saying he will follow the law *to the end* or for its reward. It may be that there is no real difference. Following the law to its end means receiving reward from the perspective of the covenant that links obedience with reward (see Deut. 27 – 28). In verse 34, he recognizes that the ability to observe the law depends on understanding it correctly, and that is his further request. He delights in God's law, but needs God's guidance as to how to obey it. The psalmist shows awareness that his own selfish desires could overwhelm his godly yearning to follow God and his law, so he requests God's help in this area. He also knows of his propensity to be distracted by worthless things, which could be an allusion to idols, but again he counts on God to keep him on the straight and narrow. He dreads the disgrace that would come by succumbing to his desires, so he asks God to keep him from it and preserve his life.

119:41–48. Waw. The psalmist implies here what he makes explicit elsewhere (e.g. in the next stanza): he is under duress. For this reason, he begins by asking God to make his *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) and *salvation* come to him. God has indeed promised his covenant people his unfailing love, which can be understood as issuing forth in loyalty that would protect them from their enemies. If the psalmist is secure in his awareness of God's good will towards

him, then human taunts won't touch him (v. 42). His hope is in God's law (v. 43b), so he will always obey it (v. 44). While some might think keeping the law restricts them, the psalmist understands that it leads to freedom (v. 45). He is not ashamed of his utter devotion to God's law and will witness its power, even before kings (v. 46).

119:49–56. Zayin. The psalmist calls on God to *remember* his word to him (v. 49), because as the psalmist remembers God's laws he finds comfort in them (v. 52). The laws, after all, come with promises for obedience (i.e. Deut. 27 – 28). Therefore, he can find strength in spite of the mocking of the *arrogant* and wicked people who harass him (v. 53). He is ever mindful of and obedient to the law, and has even made it his *song* (v. 54).

119:57–64. Heth. The psalmist again reaffirms his commitment to God (*You are my portion*; see commentary at 16:5–8) and to observe his law (vv. 57b, 59, 60). He commits himself to overcoming the obstacles that wicked people place in his way by metaphorically depicting them tying him up with ropes to keep him from obedience (v. 61). He even rises at *midnight* to thank God for his laws, and promises to associate with those who, like him, *fear* God.

119:65–72. Teth. Perhaps the most interesting revelation of this stanza is the psalmist's acknowledgment that his affliction was a result of his going astray (v. 67). This explains his intense desire to stay on the straight and narrow path of obedience. He thus continues to ask God to teach him. Although he does in this way recognize that he was not perfect, he also believes that others (here described as *arrogant*, v. 69b) continue to aggravate his condition. While formerly he dismissed God and his law, now he believes God's law is the most precious thing in the world (*more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold*, v. 72).

119:73–80. Yodh. For the first time in this psalm, the composer connects God as Creator with God as Law-giver. God made him, and therefore he is the One who ought to know the right way to live (v. 73). The psalmist continues to call on God to teach him his law and then reward him appropriately for following it. He also again requests God to punish the *arrogant* (v. 78).

119:81–88. Kaph. The poet's urgent pleas for God's help and deliverance from his enemies here reach a new pitch. He describes his crumbling emotional state (*my soul faints* [v. 81a]; *my eyes fail* [v. 82a]). He also likens himself to a *wineskin in the smoke* (v. 83a). The smoke would shrivel the wineskin and thus render it both unattractive as well as useless. His enemies are vicious and they have *almost wiped him from the earth* (v. 87a), but he maintains his integrity and faithfulness to God's law.

119:89–96. Lamedh. The stanza begins with a repetitive and thus emphatic

affirmation of the eternality of the law (vv. 89–91). The law is always relevant. The composer then speaks about how God’s laws saved him, and thus he loves them (vv. 92–93). Whether the law saved him by keeping him from certain behaviours or by motivating him to repent and seek forgiveness is not clear. The psalmist also appeals to God to save him from the wicked, expressing his eagerness to keep the law, which is the definition of *perfection* (v. 96).

119:97–104. Mem. The psalmist begins the stanza with a strong affirmation of his affection for the law which leads to his constant meditation on it. The Lord’s commands make him wise because they reveal God’s will. They also keep him from evil. Honey is sweet, but God’s words are even sweeter as he speaks them. It is notable that he claims to be smarter than his teachers (v. 99), which may indicate that he is a relatively young person.

119:105–112. Nun. Life is a journey, and wisdom literature often likens it to walking on a path (Ps. 1:1 and throughout Proverbs). The law lights up the path of life, revealing to us God’s will for how we are to live. We thus avoid the pitfalls and snares that may trouble our lives (v. 105). The psalmist again expresses his deep commitment to follow God’s law (vv. 106, 111–112). Indeed, he wants to learn more about the law (v. 108b). His life has been characterized by suffering (v. 107a), and he calls on God to help him, according to his word.

119:113–120. Samekh. This stanza focuses on the threat to the psalmist from evil people. *Double-minded people* are those who appear to be following God, but really they aren’t. They don’t truly love God’s law as the psalmist does. The psalmist knows that he does not have the resources to rebuff the attacks of evil people, so he puts his trust in God and his protection, knowing that God will not tolerate the plots of the wicked.

119:121–128. Ayin. This stanza reveals more than most that the psalmist is under pressure from those who want to harm him (my *oppressors*, v. 121), and thus he appeals to God for protection (v. 122). The psalmist loves God’s law and affirms his commitment to avoid wrong paths.

119:129–136. Pe. The psalmist opens the stanza by again praising God’s laws and committing himself to obeying them (v. 129). To read and understand God’s words gives wisdom and guidance on how to live. The *simple* (or immature) gain understanding from them. The psalmist himself expresses his intense desire to learn and understand, a desire born out of the need for guidance (v. 131). In the next four verses (132–135), he petitions God to be merciful to him, to redeem him from those who oppress him and to make his presence obvious to him (*make your face shine on your servant*, an obvious allusion to the priestly prayer of Num. 6:22–27). As he looks around and observes people neglecting the law, he is moved to tears.

119:137–144. *Tsadhe*. God's law reflects his *righteous* character. The psalmist promulgates God's law in spite of significant opposition. His adherence to the law has brought him trouble, rather than success and wealth. Even so, he is not in it for the reward, but because the law is true. He thus asks for deeper understanding.

119:145–152. *Qoph*. The psalmist is under threat. Although he does not obey the law in order to obtain reward, he does use his devotion as a basis for his call to God to save him from distress. He is being attacked by the wicked, but he finds comfort in the fact that God's presence is palpable.

119:153–160. *Resh*. The psalmist continues to call on God to save him from his enemies, who are wicked and therefore loathsome. He obeys God's law, but they don't, and this again is the basis of his call to God to help him.

119:161–168. *Sin and Shin*. His enemies include the powerful of this earth (*rulers*). This persecution does not deter his obedience to the law, for the law is true and he loves truth (v. 163), but hates falsehood. Thus, he gives God his utter and full devotion (v. 164; the number *seven* signifies completion and totality).

119:169–176. *Taw*. The psalmist concludes his lengthy poem with a series of supplications, imploring God to hear and answer his prayer by rescuing him (vv. 169–170, 173, 175). He also asks God for the strength to continue his worship (vv. 171–173). He has wandered (*like a lost sheep*, v. 176) and asks God to find him.

Meaning

The predominant focus of the psalmist is on the law of God. Like Psalm 19, this psalm also praises the wondrous quality of God's word. The law is righteous (vv. 75, 137, 144), trustworthy (vv. 86, 138), eternal (vv. 89, 152, 160b) and true (vv. 142, 151, 160a). It illumines the way of the psalmist (vv. 105, 130), and keeping the law confers a blessing on the obedient (v. 1).

The psalmist suffers in this life (vv. 25, 28, 50, 67) and is under attack from those who want to oppress him (vv. 85, 87, 107, 121, 134, 141, 143, 150, 161). He is aware of his own failures (v. 176). Thus, he pleads with God to be good to him and to help him (vv. 65, 146–147, 153–154, 176). He knows that the key is to obey God's law. So he expresses his love for the law (vv. 16, 20, 24, 47, 72, 97, 113, 163), as well as his desire to know and keep it (vv. 4–5, 40, 81, 131), and asks God to teach him (vv. 12, 26, 33, 73, 125). He affirms in no uncertain terms his intention to keep the law (vv. 8, 30, 44, 106, 129, 167).

The law is consistent with God's character and expresses his will for how we should lead our lives. Neither in the Old nor the New Testament is the law the

key to establishing a relationship with God, for that is an act of God's grace in our lives. However, the law is an expression of the character and will of God, and we maintain our relationship with him by keeping it. Jesus himself affirmed the importance of the law when he said that 'not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished' (Matt. 5:18). Still, 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). Jesus is the only One who has perfectly kept the law. But what about us who deserve the penalty coming to law breakers? As Paul joyfully proclaimed, 'Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!' (Rom. 7:25). Jesus not only kept the law, but died on our behalf, so we can have a relationship with God.

Excursus: Psalms of ascent

The next fifteen psalms (Pss 120 – 134) each have a title that includes ‘A song of ascents’. Of course, ancient readers would have known precisely what was meant by the phrase, but this understanding has been lost over time, and we are left with the necessity of educated guesswork.

The history of interpretation has produced quite a variety of explanations. Some have taken it to mean a spiritual ascent (Augustine), while others believe it refers to a rising musical pitch (Calvin), and still others suggest that the ascent is a physical one that involves some kind of upward movement.

Hints within the content of the psalms themselves move us towards the last of these three suggestions, but even here we can observe different interpretations over the years. While some believe these psalms are connected to the specific historical event of the return from Babylonian captivity beginning in 539 BC (Psalms, Midrash), there are no clear indications of this, with the exception of Psalm 126. The Talmud preferred the view that there were fifteen songs, with each successive song being sung while ascending the fifteen steps to the temple itself. In our opinion, the most persuasive view is that the songs were sung while pilgrims made the journey to Jerusalem from outlying areas in order to worship at the temple there, particularly during one of the great annual festivals.^[150] Of course, the trip to the temple on Zion in Jerusalem would involve not only a physical journey, but also a spiritual one, since Jerusalem was the place where heaven met earth.

We hold this view tentatively. Not all the psalms fit into this proposed scenario, but a number do. For one thing, it is significant that certain psalms speak about Zion and/or Jerusalem directly (Pss 122, 125, 126, 128, 129, 132, 133, 134) or indirectly. In terms of the latter, we might think of the mountains to which the psalmist lifts his eyes as those that surround Jerusalem (Ps. 121), or the psalmist’s statement that he lifts his eyes to the One enthroned in heaven as a reference to him lifting his eyes to the temple where God makes his presence known on earth (Ps. 123). Furthermore, it is significant that the first psalm in the series (120) bemoans being in a foreign land.

With this introduction, we will now turn to an analysis of each of the songs of ascent.

Psalm 120. I am for peace

Context

Here, in the first of fifteen psalms of ascent, the psalmist speaks from a spot distant from Jerusalem. As the pilgrimage begins, he is in the midst of a foreign and dangerous people (represented by *Meshek* and *Kedar*). ‘Psalm 120 introduces a lyrical speaker at the margins of the world where *šālôm* (peace) is hated’ (Gillmayr-Bucher 2010: 498). The psalmist thus prays a lament, calling on God to help him in his distress.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120.

Comment

120:1–2. Deliver me

The psalmist opens with a simple statement of trust that God hears his prayers when he is in trouble. Such confidence provides grounds for his present appeal to God to save him. His concern has to do with people who are seeking to deceive him. He refers to these liars by a synecdoche, whereby body parts represent the person (*lying lips, deceitful tongues*), making the reference more concrete. In keeping with the nature of psalms, which rarely speak about a specific context (so they can be applied to various situations by different people), the exact nature of the deceit is not mentioned. That said, the reference to peace and war in verses 6–7 implies that the context is war or potential war, and the liars are the psalmist’s enemies.

120:3–4. God’s punishment

The psalmist then turns from addressing God to speak about liars, as if he were communicating with them personally. He asks a question in verse 3 and answers it in verse 4. Mockingly, he asks the liars (still addressed by means of synecdoche, *deceitful tongues*) to consider the fate that God has in store for them. He then tells them in no uncertain terms that God will punish them for their lies. The punishment will come in the form of a warrior’s *sharp arrows* and *burning coals of the broom bush*. If the context of the psalm is warfare, the first threat is clearly literal. The army accompanying the psalmist will attack them, and God will see that they succeed. The second punishment (*burning coals of the*

broom brush) is not obviously military, although the negative implications of the phrase are clear. The broom brush or shrub grows in Palestine, Arabia and Egypt. It can reach a height that can provide shade, as it did for Elijah in the wilderness (1 Kgs 19:4–6). The roots can be extracted and burned like charcoal. The NRSV believes that this is the sense of Job’s description of the poor as those who ‘warm themselves with the root of the broom’ (30:4b), although the NIV renders this line: ‘their food was the root of the broom bush’.^[151] The reference to the broom bush may indicate a wilderness setting for the composer.

120:5–6. Among hostile strangers

The lament ends on a sad note, as the psalmist bemoans his present wretched condition. The section begins with a strong exclamation of sadness (*woe*), often heard in funeral processions (1 Kgs 13:30; Jer. 22:18; 34:5; Amos 5:16) and also well known in what have come to be known as *woe-oracles*, prophetic oracles pronouncing woes on nations that are ‘as good as dead’ (Isa. 5:18–19; Amos 5:18–20; 6:1–7; Mic. 2:1–4; Nah. 3:1–3, to name only a few). Here the prophet is saying that he might as well be dead, since he finds himself in Meshek and among the tents of Kedar.

Meshek is known as a nomadic tribe descended from Japheth (Gen. 10:2; 1 Chr. 1:5) and thus associated with Asia Minor. Elsewhere, Meshek is described as having trade relations with Tyre (Ezek. 27:13) and as part of Magog (a cipher for Babylon; Ezek. 38:2; 39:1). *Kedar* is a nomadic tribe descended from Abraham through Ishmael (Gen. 25:13; 1 Chr. 1:29). They were herders and shepherds (Isa. 60:7; Jer. 49:28–29) and, as the psalm indicates, they lived in tents (see also Song 1:5). Jeremiah places them in the eastern portion of the Arabian Desert (Jer. 2:10). It is not clear whether Meshek and Kedar are located in the same place, and it may not be the intention of the psalm to be so specific. These two nomadic desert tribes may be mentioned simply to indicate that the psalmist is far from home and in a desolate place. In other words, a modern equivalent might be: ‘I am as far away as Timbuktu.’ Even though Timbuktu is a real place, the expression indicates being anywhere that is incredibly distant and foreign.

Wherever he is, the place is dangerous. He wants peace, but they want war. So his only recourse is to call on God to help him in his distress.

Meaning

The modern reader may use this psalm as a model prayer when facing hostility and deceit, and feeling as if they are in a strange and perhaps distant place. The

psalmist implicitly longs to be at home, not far away. For him, home denotes safety, and of course for the ancient psalmist, home would be near the place where God makes his presence most palpably real, on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. His prayer, though, indicates his belief that God can answer him and make his presence known even in Meshek or Kedar. The New Testament proclaims that Christ is the very presence of God, and he sends the Spirit to dwell in us. So we can be in God's presence, even in Timbuktu.

This, the first of the psalms of ascent or pilgrimage, begins far away and expresses a longing to be close to home. The journey towards Zion has started.

Psalm 121. God watches over you

Context

The second of the psalms of ascent begins with a look to the mountains and a query about the source of one's help. In Psalm 120, the psalmist was stuck in a distant and hostile place, but in Psalm 121 he seems to be on the move. The psalm expresses deep confidence in God's ability to protect him and the community (notice the psalmist is speaking to others, you).

The psalm can be divided into four two-verse stanzas that build on each other, particularly through the repetition of the word *watch* (*šmr*; vv. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8).

For more on the title (*A song of ascents*),^[152] see the excursus before Psalm 120.

Comment

121:1–2. Help comes from the Lord

As the psalmist looks at the *mountains* from a distance, he asks about the source of his *help*. Where does it come from? The question, of course, presumes that he needs help, either immediately or in the future. Even so, this psalm is not a lament, but rather a psalm of confidence. He is not worried, because he knows where to turn when he needs aid – to none other than God himself, the Creator of the cosmos.

If we are correct in seeing the psalms of ascent as songs sung by pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem, then the mountains are probably those surrounding that city, although there is nothing in the psalm itself that specifies their identification. In ancient Israel (and the broader Ancient Near East), mountains were a metaphor for the divine realm (see Ps. 46). Of course, Zion was the mountain that instilled confidence in the hearts of the faithful, so it is somewhat surprising that Zion is not specifically mentioned. Other gods were thought to dwell on other mountains, and that may be the point. As the psalmist gazes at the mountains, they remind him of the true God, the only One who can provide help, the LORD (Yahweh).^[153]

121:3–4. God does not sleep

Israel's God provides a constant watch over the faithful, a truth which the

psalmist uses to assure his hearers as he applies it to himself (*he will not let your foot slip*). Verse 3a too resonates with a pilgrimage context. As the people walk towards Jerusalem, their footing is important, and God will see them safely to their destination. However, the phrase should also be taken metaphorically. In wisdom literature, everyone is walking on a path, either the straight path that leads to life, or the twisty, dark path that leads to death. The path stands for life's journey (Longman 2006: 151–155). Here the psalmist is certain that God will give them sure footing on the path to life. Furthermore, God is ever vigilant, a characteristic communicated by the description that he never sleeps. When Baal did not light the altar fire on top of Mount Carmel, Elijah mocked his priests by saying, 'Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened' (1 Kgs 18:27). The Lord is always there, 'an ever-present help in trouble' (Ps. 46:1).

121:5–6. *The Lord provides shade*

The third stanza picks up and develops further the picture of God as the One who watches over his people, utilizing the metaphor of God as a *shade*. The shade protects a person from the harsh and harmful effects of the sun, so it is not surprising that verse 6a goes on to say that, because God is a shade, the *sun* will not hurt his people. The meaning of verse 6b is not as obvious: that God is a shade who protects his people from the harmful effects of the *moon*. Several possibilities present themselves. First, sun and moon may be used as a merism simply to say again that God is on a twenty-four-hour watch over his people. Secondly, in the Ancient Near East, both sun and moon were thought to be deities that could bring harm on people. Of course, Genesis 1 makes it clear right from the start that in Israel the sun and moon are God's creation and are not gods. Thirdly, at least by New Testament times, it was thought that the moon could affect people's mental and physical abilities. In Matthew 17:15, the verb *selēniazetai* can be literally translated 'to be moonstruck' and is often used to refer to epileptic seizures. However, we cannot be certain that this understanding goes back to the time of the psalm. The main point is clear. The psalmist can have confidence, because God is constantly protecting him from all kinds of dangers.

121:7–8. *The Lord watches over you*

The final stanza continues the theme of God as the One who watches and protects his people, and emphasizing the assurance that he does this on all occasions (*your coming and going*), as well as constantly (*both now and for evermore*).

Meaning

The psalm is a reminder to both ancient and modern readers that God watches over his people as they journey on their pilgrimage and, more broadly, as they journey through life (Hausmann 2010: 47–54). The verb *watch* can also be rendered ‘protect’, ‘guard’ or ‘keep’. God is not only watching, but is actively protecting his people from evil and harm.

The Christian reader is reminded of Jesus’ high priestly prayer, where he asks his Father to ‘protect them by the power of your name’ (John 17:11). The Christian’s confidence is bolstered by Paul’s statement that ‘neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 8:38–39).

Psalm 122. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem

Context

The psalm's *Comment* strongly supports the idea that the songs of ascent found their setting in a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate a religious festival. The psalmist begins with a reminiscence of the original decision to make the journey, and now the pilgrims find themselves in the holy city. The psalm is a hymn celebrating the city that hosts the special presence of God, as represented by the 'house of God', and ends with a prayer for its prosperity. Such psalms are known as 'hymns of Zion' (see also Pss 46, 48, 76, 84, 87).

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120. This psalm adds an authorship ascription to David (see Introduction: Authorship titles, pp. 25–28).

Comment

122:1–2. *Let's go to the house of the Lord*

The psalmist remembers the original decision to make the journey to Jerusalem. The idea did not originate with him, but he joined in with a group of pilgrims to go to the city that hosts the *house of the LORD*, a phrase which refers to the sanctuary. Taking the Davidic authorship of the psalm seriously (see title) requires us to think that the house is the tabernacle (referred to as the 'house of God' in Exod. 23:19; 34:26), although in later periods it would refer to the temple. If the psalm is Davidic, 2 Samuel 6, which describes David moving the ark to Jerusalem, could provide an appropriate background to its original composition.¹⁵⁴

The opening scene of the psalm suggests their arrival at the city, which is personified and addressed in the second person (*your gates*), since the people find themselves standing at the *gates*. They marvel at the fact that they have finally arrived after their long journey.

122:3–5. *Magnificent Jerusalem*

The pilgrims' arrival in Jerusalem leads the psalmist to marvel at the city. While the description of Jerusalem as a city closely compacted together might lead a modern reader to negative conclusions about urban congestion, the context suggests that this is a positive description. The Hebrew word translated *closely*

compacted comes from a root (*ḥbr*) that refers to an alliance or an association. While the word can have negative connotations (Prov. 28:24; Isa. 1:23), here the context suggests a positive association, a finely honed and functioning city.

Verse 4 then comments on the city as the place where the various tribes of Israel go to praise God. Jerusalem itself was the ‘City of David’, captured by David’s men and claimed in his name (2 Sam. 5:6–16). In other words, Jerusalem is not a part of any of the tribes of Israel, but it is the spiritual and political centre of a united Israel. The reference to the thrones of judgment, also identified as the thrones of the house of David, is a bit enigmatic, as that description is otherwise unknown. It appears to refer to Jerusalem as the centre of Israel’s justice system associated with the king’s central power.

122:6–9. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem

As the first part of the psalm states, Jerusalem is an important city for the spiritual, political and legal stability of the nation. Thus, its peace ensures the security of the nation as a whole (*for the sake of my family and friends*). For this reason and others, prayer for its continued stability and prosperity is crucial, and so the psalmist urges others to join him in so praying.

Meaning

During the Old Testament period, Jerusalem was the place where God made his special presence known to his people. In this sense, it was the centre of the world, and so pilgrims travelled to that city and prayed for its peace and security.

Since the coming of Christ, Christians know that God’s holy presence permeates the world and there are no longer any specifically holy places. We can meet with God anywhere, not just in a particular city. While it is certainly appropriate and right to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, the psalm does not mean that Christians need to support the modern government of Israel, right or wrong. Indeed, we should pray for the peace, security and prosperity of the whole world. In particular, we should pray for the peace of the body of believers, the church, whom the New Testament refers to as Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26) and which anticipates the future new Jerusalem, the abode of God and humans after this world as we know it has passed away (Rev. 21:9–27).

Psalm 123. I lift my eyes

Context

Psalm 123 is a lament in which the psalmist calls on God for help in the midst of the attack of arrogant, evil people. The psalm is striking for its use of the simile that compares the psalmist's anticipation of God's action to that of servants who wait for their master to act.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120.

Comment

123:1–2. Submission

Psalm 123 begins with the same idiom as that found in Psalm 121 (*I lift up my eyes*). This indicates a focus of awareness and is 'a gesture of deep longing' (Terrien 2003: 818). The earlier psalm focuses on the mountains, which make the psalmist think of God. In Psalm 123, the psalmist lifts his eyes to God himself, whom he addresses directly. God is described as the One who is enthroned in heaven. The temple was the locus of God's presence on earth, and the ark of the covenant was thought to be the footstool of his throne, but the temple represented heavenly realities. Isaiah describes his call to the prophetic ministry in the setting of the heavenly court (Isa. 6).

Verse 2 presents a simile that helps to describe the nature of the psalmist's gaze. The faithful look to God as slaves look to the hand of their master. Interestingly, the second colon introduces a female perspective and a feminine image of God, comparing his gaze towards God as that of *a female slave to the hand of her mistress*. Of course, there are many reasons why a slave would look to the master's hand, including the giving of orders, provisions or punishment. The simile certainly emphasizes the psalmist's utter dependence on God, like that of slaves on their master, and it also properly illustrates the tremendous power differential between God and his faithful people. Slaves would also fear their master, an attitude that God desires to see in his people (Prov. 1:7). The final colon of the stanza (v. 2d) indicates what the psalmist desires from God, namely mercy, and this thought is developed in the next stanza.

123:3–4. Enduring contempt

We now learn the reason why the psalmist needs mercy. He and the other faithful ones have suffered the indignities of the powerful and arrogant. They need their divine and heavenly Master to come to their aid. No wonder they look to God as to the hand of a master or mistress, since 'hand' may often be understood as power in the Old Testament. God will use his power to bring their oppression to an end.

Meaning

The psalmist adopts an attitude of humility before God, the divine Master, as he hopes for help in the midst of persecution. He submits himself to God in order to be free from the oppressor (Moody 2013: 52–53). Perhaps the most striking aspect of the gospel is that Jesus himself takes on the role of a servant on our behalf, washing the disciples' feet (John 13:1–17). Paul calls on Christians to adopt the same attitude as Christ:

who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!
(*Phil. 2:6–8*)

Psalm 124. The Lord is on our side

Context

The psalmist leads Israel in thanksgiving to God for delivering them from an enemy that wanted to ravage them. Considering the brevity of the psalm, it is remarkable how many vivid metaphors of potential destruction the psalmist uses to communicate the danger faced by the community, thus heightening the greatness of God who saved them.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120. This psalm adds an authorship ascription to David (see Introduction: Authorship titles, pp. 25–28).

Comment

124:1–5. *The Lord is on our side*

A repetitive staircase parallelism opens the psalm, delaying the identification of the consequence of the repeated item (*if the LORD had not been on our side*), thus building suspense. After the first statement, the psalmist calls on the congregation to join in (*let Israel say*), indicating the liturgical nature of the psalm. Verse 2b identifies the situation in which God's presence was critical, namely the attack by Israel's enemies. If he had not been present, according to verse 3a, their enemies, driven by their anger, would have soundly defeated them. Verse 3a describes defeat as a swallowing. The enemy would have swallowed Israel alive, probably a mythological allusion to the Canaanite god Mot (Death) swallowing Baal. Indeed, Mot is described as a god whose upper lip is in the heavens and lower lip is on earth, swallowing everything in his path. Verse 4 utilizes a different ancient mythological allusion for the same purpose. The waters would have swept them away.

124:6–8. *Escape*

But God was there with them, and thus they escaped the ravages of their angry enemies. Otherwise, they would have been torn apart, just as a wild animal devours its prey (v. 6). They would have been trapped like a fowler snares a bird (v. 7). This great act of divine deliverance leads to the confident proclamation that God, the Creator, is Israel's helper (v. 8).

Meaning

The psalmist leads the community as they give thanks to God for rescuing them from the hands of an enemy intent on destroying them. God was on their side and the implication is that he was on their side as a Warrior who fought and defeated their enemies. While no specific event is mentioned here (and thus it could be used multiple times for similar, though not identical, situations), the historical books contain many stories of God saving his people in this way, perhaps most notably from the Egyptians at the Re(e)d Sea.

Christians are engaged in a spiritual battle (Eph. 6:10–20) that is beyond their resources to fight successfully. Thus, our only hope is in God’s help, and this psalm is a model prayer directing us to give thanks to the One who supplies us with the spiritual weapons and armour needed to escape the attacks of our enemy. Paul voices the same joyful confidence as the psalmist when he declares, ‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’ (Rom. 8:31).¹⁵⁵

Psalm 125. Trust God

Context

The psalm begins with a strong expression of confidence in God and continues with the belief that the wicked will not be able to dominate the righteous in the land of Israel. Thus, the poem appears to be a community psalm of confidence. That said, the psalmist does request that God uphold proper retribution towards the righteous and the wicked, and asks for peace for Israel. Certain ways of reading this psalm imply that Israel is under duress (see commentary on v. 3), but in our opinion this is unlikely.

This psalm does not have a clear connection with pilgrimage (see the excursus before Ps. 120 on psalms of ascent). However, the mention of Mount Zion and the mountains surrounding Jerusalem may place the composer in the holy city.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120.

Comment

125:1–2. Trust in God

According to the psalmist, *trust* in God is the key to a stable life. He both confesses his own trust and advocates others to trust in God, claiming that those who do so will be like *Mount Zion*. Mountains are often symbolic of stability and endurance, particularly in contrast to the waters of chaos (Ps. 46). And here, the psalmist names the most important mountain of all, Zion, the location of the temple.

The mention of Zion in verse 1 leads the psalmist to draw another analogy based on the image of the mountains. Here, God surrounds his people, just as the mountains surround Jerusalem. The mountains protect Jerusalem when it is attacked and so, as the analogy implies, God protects his people.

In Psalm 121, the psalmist lifted his eyes to the mountains, and now he is surrounded by the mountains. The connection between Psalms 121 and 122 suggests the journey motif of the psalms of ascent (see Excursus: Psalms of ascent).

125:3. The fall of the wicked

The middle verse is the most enigmatic, both in terms of its meaning and its

connection to the beginning and end of the psalm. The general principle is clear: the wicked will not prevail (the *sceptre* is a symbol of rule) over the land occupied by the righteous. However, is this verse saying that the wicked will not even get a foothold (as implied by the NJB: ‘The sceptre of the wicked will not come to rest over the heritage of the upright’) or that, although the wicked have indeed come to dominate, they ‘will not continue to hold sway in the land allotted to the righteous’ (REB)?¹⁵⁶ The grammar can work either way, but the latter seems to conflict with the first two verses of the psalm that affirm God’s protection of those who trust God.

In either case, the second part of the verse gives the reason why the wicked won’t rule the righteous. If they did, then the righteous *might use their hands to do evil*. The precise nature of their evil is not given, probably intentionally. Does it mean that they might be tempted to use violence to overthrow the wicked? That is doubtful, since examples of such in the Old Testament are lauded (2 Kgs 11). More likely the fear is that the righteous would start to emulate the wicked.

125:4–5. *Peace*

The psalm ends with requests that God reward those who are good and punish those who are wicked, the latter by banishing them. The final hope is that Israel will be at *peace*.

Meaning

The psalm expresses trust in God’s protection from evil rulers who want to dominate the land of Israel. It calls on God to grant peace to Israel and to reward and punish those who deserve it.

Psalm 125’s encouragement to trust in God’s protection is similar to Psalm 121, and, like Psalm 121, Psalm 125 can be a model prayer for the Christian’s confidence in the protection offered by God through Jesus Christ (see Psalm 121: *Meaning*).

Psalm 126. The restoration of Zion

Context

Zion again (see Ps. 125:1) appears in the first verse of this psalm, perhaps indicating once more the presence of the pilgrims who have ascended to Jerusalem (for more on the title [A song of ascents], see the excursus before Ps. 120).

The psalm starts out like a thanksgiving song, celebrating the restoration of the community's fortunes, but the second part leads us to understand that it is a lament of the community (for how the two fit together, see *Comment*).

Below, we will give consideration to a possible historical setting for the composition of the psalm as the return from Babylon. While such a moment is fitting, the poem is not concretely connected to that time and thus can be used in any setting where God in his grace and mercy restores the fortunes of his people.

Comment

126:1–3. Joy in restoration

The poet marvels at his community's restoration. *Zion*, the holy mountain in Jerusalem, here stands for the whole city, if not the broader community. The phrase *restored the fortunes* is a translation of a verb and its cognate nominative, whose basic root (*šûb*) means to 'turn' or 'return'. It appears about twenty-five times in the Old Testament, in contexts that indicate a change of fortune for an individual or a community (e.g. Job 42:10; Jer. 32:44). The NIV footnote rendition, 'brought back the captives', is based on the idea that the nominative is from a different Hebrew root, a view not widely held today. That said, as indicated in the *Context* section above, the restoration of fortunes could well refer to a return to captivity, although the phrase is broader than that. The reality of the restoration was so amazing that it felt as though they were dreaming. But their new happy condition was real, and they responded with great joy and laughter. Even the nations could only point to God's greatness to explain the reversal of fortune.

126:4–6. Restore us

Initially, it seems odd that the psalmist would first state that the community's

fortunes had been restored and then ask God to restore their fortunes, as he does in this stanza. But one only has to remember the return from Babylonian captivity for an example of how these two are not in tension with each other. After the initial return from Babylon under the leadership of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel had taken place (and their fortunes were restored), plenty of social and physical healing was still needed (*restore our fortunes, LORD*). We are not definitely placing the psalm at this historical moment, but simply offering an illustration of an already-not yet restoration of fortunes.

Such a restoration would be like the appearance of *streams in the Negev*, a well-known wilderness area where there is very little water. Verses 5–6 then speak of emotional restoration. God is able to take those who weep and make them rejoice. Verse 6 gives an agricultural twist to this theme, as it envisions farmers going out with seed while weeping, and then rejoicing as they return with the harvest (*carrying sheaves with them*).

Meaning

The psalmist asks God to continue the work of restoration of the community's fortunes that he had already begun. In other words, the psalmist speaks from an already-not yet perspective. Christians can relate to this moment in their own spiritual lives. We have been saved from sin and death by the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. However, our salvation is not yet completely worked out. We still suffer, sin and die. But we know that the future will bring the full realization of our restoration. Thus, we can rejoice in God's work in our life as we ask him to complete our salvation.

Psalm 127. Unless the Lord builds the house

Context

The eighth song of ascent is the first wisdom poem among them. Proverbs teaches that ‘the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom’ (1:7), and this psalm stresses the importance of putting God first in life. Both stanzas (vv. 1–2 and vv. 3–5) teach that God provides every good thing (shelter, protection, food, sleep and family).

Verse 5 points to a public dispute as the background to the composition of the psalm, but the main theme that reminds us of our dependence on God extends well beyond that original situation.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120. This psalm adds an authorship ascription to Solomon (see Introduction: Authorship titles, pp. 25–28).

Comment

127:1–2. Unless the Lord builds

Success depends on the Lord, not on our own efforts. True, the *builders* must build the house and the *guards* must stand watch over the city, but unless God builds and protects, then all the human effort in the world will not produce a house or protect a city. It will be *in vain*, useless, meaningless. The effort of building a house is here not just talking about construction, but also about a family (as will become clear in the second stanza) and, in particular, about children.

Verse 2 indicates that all the effort in the world will not allow people to survive or thrive. Losing sleep in order to obtain food is a waste of time; God grants sleep (and food) to those he loves. This thought is interesting in the light of the picture of the noble woman who works hard and ‘does not put her lamp out at night’ (Prov. 31:18).¹⁵⁷ Again, it is doubtful that the psalmist encourages people to sit at home and expect God to provide (such a view would run counter to the strong wisdom tradition that calls for hard work and the avoidance of laziness [Prov. 6:6–11; 10:4–5, etc.]), but he does make the point that, no matter how intense our efforts, success comes from God and from nowhere else.

127:3–5. *Children are a heritage*

The second stanza then praises the blessing of children (the Hebrew indicates that specifically sons are meant in verse 3a, although verse 3b broadens with a phrase (*offspring*; lit. ‘fruit of the womb’) that would include all children, suggesting that the house spoken of in verse 1 refers to more than the physical structure, but also to the family (see above). God provides children; they are a *heritage* and a *reward* from him. Children confer real advantage on a person in the battle of life. Indeed, the more the better. They will be agents of support to the head of the household. The last colon (*when they contend with their opponents in court* [lit. ‘in the gate’]) may point to the situation that motivated the composition of the psalm originally. The psalmist may be under legal attack and so looks to his family for help.

Meaning

The psalm reminds us that every good thing we enjoy (food, shelter, protection, family) are gifts from God, not a result of our own energy and resources. We should not be lazy or negligent, but we should never depend on ourselves. Furthermore, we must be careful to remember that wisdom does not provide universally true guarantees: for instance, that everyone who loves God will be blessed with sleep and large families.^{[158](#)}

According to Psalm 127, children are a gift from God and bring blessings on their parents. Of course, the promise to Abraham included the blessing of descendants who would become a nation (Gen. 12:1–3). The ultimate fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise of children is Jesus (Gal. 3:16), and Christians are all recipients of the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant in our union with him (3:29). In addition, Christian parents can rejoice in the fact that ‘the promise is for you and your children’ (Acts. 2:39).

One might also note a connection with the Davidic covenant in the fact that the psalm speaks of house building and is ascribed to Solomon, the son of David, who ‘will build a house for my Name’ (2 Sam. 7:13). Of course, the Davidic covenant also speaks of David’s royal children, a line that will culminate in the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Psalm 128. The fear of the Lord

Context

Psalm 128, like Psalm 127, is a wisdom poem. The wisdom nature of the psalm is revealed in the first colon, which pronounces a blessing on those who *fear the LORD* (see Prov. 1:7 and numerous times in the book). This song ascribes success and prosperity to the family of those who fear God. Like Psalm 125, it also ends with a statement of hope for the peace of Israel.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120.

Comment

128:1–4. *Family blessings*

The psalmist announces that those who hold the right attitude and act in the appropriate manner will be blessed. The right attitude is the fear of the Lord. This is not the type of emotion that makes one run away, but it is an acknowledgment of God's central place and power. Those who fear the Lord will be humble, not proud, and will listen to God's laws and advice. Those who fear the Lord thus walk in obedience to him. Behind the metaphor of walking is the path, a major analogy in wisdom literature (especially in Prov. 1 – 9). There are two paths, and everyone walks on one or the other. Those who are blessed walk on the straight path that leads to life, not the crooked path that leads to death.

To be blessed means to enjoy the benefits bestowed on the first humans in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 1:22, 28), and may also be described by looking at the blessings of the covenant in Deuteronomy 27 – 28. Most importantly, a blessed person has a rich relationship with God, as well as material blessings such as sufficient food, a happy family and freedom from strife.

This description resonates with verses 2–3, which speak of a fertile, productive wife (*like a fruitful vine*) who produces productive, useful children (*like olive shoots*). The vine produces grapes for wine that brings enjoyment. Olives produce oil, an integral part of the agricultural bounty of Israel.

God's punishment on Adam included a curse on the ground, so that it 'will produce thorns and thistles for you' (Gen. 3:18). The blessed man in Psalm 128, however, will eat the fruit of his labour (v. 2). Verse 4 brings the first stanza to a close by repeating the major elements of verse 1.

128:5–6. *May the Lord bless you*

After conferring a blessing on those who fear the Lord, the psalmist now requests a blessing on those who hear his words. God blesses from Zion, the location of the temple. The blessing includes the prosperity of Jerusalem and its peace and security, as well as plenty of food. In addition, blessing brings long life, meaning that the blessed one would live to see his grandchildren come into the world.

Meaning

The psalm calls its reader/listener to the fear of the Lord, a life of wisdom. A right relationship with God is accompanied by obedience to his law. Such a life is characterized as blessed and prosperous. The psalmist links the benefits of long life, security, a healthy community and a large and happy family with the way of wisdom.

We have already observed that wisdom does not promise or guarantee such blessings (see Ps. 127), but following God's way does often lead to a better life, though far from a perfect one. For that, according to the New Testament, we have to wait until Christ returns.

Psalm 129. Oppressed from my youth

Context

The genre of Psalm 129 is difficult to describe. Arguments could be made that it is a thanksgiving song, a song of confidence or a lament. Perhaps it is not important to be precise, but the context suggests a thanksgiving song. The people have been cut free from the oppression of the wicked after all. The fact that the psalmist ends with an imprecatory request in verses 5–8 (which might suggest a lament) is intended to ward off future problems, not deal with a present one.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120.

Comment

129:1–4. Oppressed from youth

The psalmist urges Israel to join him in affirming God's triumph over those who have tried to oppress them. Similar liturgical language is found in Psalm 118 (vv. 2–4) and Psalm 124 (v. 1). Israel as a community is speaking in the first-person singular. The oppressors (*they*) are not identified until verse 4, where they are referred to as *the wicked*, and verse 5, where they are called *all who hate Zion*. Since they oppress Israel as a community, it is most likely, but not certain, that the psalm refers to an external enemy. To say that the enemy has oppressed Israel from their youth refers to their early history, and certainly Israel had enemies from the time of the conquest onwards. While self-mutilation (*Ploughmen have ploughed my back and made their furrows long*, v. 3) can be a metaphor for mourning (see 1 Kgs 18:28, which has a background in Ugaritic mourning customs), here it probably refers to the wounds that the enemy inflicts on Israel.

It is God, and he alone, who has saved them from their enemy. Israel had been bound by the cords of the wicked, but God has cut them free.

129:5–8. Those who hate Zion

The second stanza expresses a request that God punish the wicked, here described as those who hate Zion. The hope that the wicked be turned back in shame may suggest a thwarted military incursion. The psalmist asks that they be *like grass on the roof*, which would not have deep roots and would therefore be withered by the pounding sun.¹⁵⁹ As such, it would be destroyed, or useless and

insubstantial, and so a reaper could not collect it. Finally, he asks that God's blessing be withheld from them.

Meaning

The psalmist leads Israel in a song that recognizes that God is the One who has freed them from the violent oppression by wicked enemies who hate Zion, and thus hate God. He wishes for the destruction of such people.

Christians too find themselves in a conflict, but not against 'flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12). As Paul reminds us, only God's armour and weaponry can protect us against such foes (Eph. 6:10–20).

Psalm 130. Out of the depths

Context

The psalm reveals itself as a lament right from the start. The psalmist is in distress and calls on God to help him. He knows his trouble is caused by his own sin, but he is also certain that God, who is characterized by unfailing love, will forgive him. At the end, he turns his attention to the community of Israel and calls on them to put their hope in God who will redeem and restore them. The specific nature of this lament, with its acknowledgment of sin and need for forgiveness, includes it among prayers traditionally called penitential psalms (see also Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 143).

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120.

Comment

130:1–2. Out of the depths

Dramatically, the psalmist begins by expressing his deep emotional distress, calling to the Lord *out of the depths*. The Hebrew word translated *depths* (*ma'āmaqîm*) is often connected with words for water or sea,¹⁶⁰ and these often refer figuratively to chaos. The psalmist finds himself in dire straits, although the particular nature of his distress is not specified. This is typical of the psalms, which are meant to be used in a multitude of situations. From this difficult place, he pleads with God to attend to his prayer.

130:3–4. Forgiveness

This stanza implies that the psalmist attributes his present suffering to sin. He appeals to God's record of *forgiveness* in the face of humanity's persistent history of sin. No-one could survive if God remembered (*kept a record of*) sins. That humanity continues to exist means that God does forgive. He does so, according to verse 4b, for a purpose. Forgiven sinners come to revere God. The Hebrew text supports a translation of the colon as 'so you may be revered', and the NIV's addition of the idea of service is enigmatic. We should point out that the root behind the translation *reverence* is the same as for 'fear' and implies the fear of the Lord spoken of in Psalm 128:1.

130:5–6. *Waiting for the Lord*

Although he is in distress, the psalmist expresses his intense and eager hope that God will indeed forgive him. This eagerness is communicated by the repetition of the verb *wait* and the simile he creates between himself and the *watchmen for the morning*. The latter are constantly alert as they await the rise of the sun, and so the psalmist is alert, expecting God's forgiveness and an alleviation of his suffering.

130:7–8. *Hope in the Lord*

The psalmist's individual lament and expression of hope lead him to end with an address to the community of Israel. *Israel* should put their hope in God for forgiveness and the alleviation of suffering, as he himself has done. God will restore the relationship with (*redeem*) Israel that has been broken by their sin. God is, after all, characterized by *unfailing love* (*hesed*), which implies covenant loyalty.

Meaning

This psalm is a model prayer for those who seek a restored relationship with God in the aftermath of the consequences of sin. The psalmist exudes confidence which is based on God's forgiving nature, and he calls on his community to vest their hope in God.

Christians look to Jesus Christ for confidence that God will indeed forgive them and restore their relationship with him. Jesus, who offered himself in our place, gives us certain hope that God will hear our pleas for forgiveness. As Paul reminds us, God 'has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins' (Col. 1:13–14).

Psalm 131. Like a mother

Context

The title identifies the psalm as a *song of ascents* (see excursus before Ps. 120). The title names *David* as the composer of the psalm, and indeed the historical books describe the early period of David's life as one of confidence in God in the midst of struggle, which is the attitude expressed in this psalm. For instance, on two occasions he has the opportunity to grasp the kingship, but chooses instead to wait on God's timing (1 Sam. 24 and 26). Regardless of the actual connection to David's life, it is correct to see the psalm as an expression of trust or confidence in God.

Comment

131:1–2. Confidence in the midst of turmoil

The first verse contains two closely related parallel lines. In the first colon of the first line, the psalmist denies that he is proud. Specifically, he claims that his *heart is not proud*. In this context, the heart, which sometimes can refer to the mind, is closer to what we would call one's inward self or character. In the second colon, he moves from the inside to the outside, when he announces that his *eyes are not haughty*. The Hebrew literally reads: 'my eyes are not lifted up', which is equivalent to a person today saying that they do not look down their nose at other people. In other words, this is a denial of a proud demeanour. In wisdom literature, the wicked are those who have eyes that are lifted up (Prov. 30:13–14), which the Lord hates (Prov. 6:17).

In the second poetic line of the first verse, the psalmist moves to action, denying that he has an ambition to strive for things that are beyond him. It is interesting to think of David uttering this song. He knew his place, as we have suggested, during his early years (see 1 Sam. 24 and 26 where he does not grasp for the kingship), but later in life, he certainly does strive for things (in particular Bathsheba) that were beyond his having. In any case, thinking of David the king of Israel as the speaker preserves us from an over-interpretation that would lead one to think the psalm is against acquiring any status in society. It is not against high position that is divinely given, but it does model a critical attitude towards pure blind ambition.

Verse 2 reveals that the psalmist's present confidence did not come naturally, but after a struggle he calmed and quietened himself. He is now as *content* as a *weaned child* is content *with its mother*. This simile describing an analogy between a weaned child with its mother and the psalmist with God thus illustrates a feminine image of God. In unpacking this simile, one must explore the nature of the relationship between a mother and a weaned child. A weaned child can rest comfortably in its mother's arms, while a baby who is not yet weaned is fussy and restless. Here the psalmist provides a picture image of the kind of trustful confidence that he is now experiencing.

131:3. Hope in the Lord

The psalmist concludes with an exhortation to the congregation of Israel to hope in God (linking back to Ps. 130:7a). Israel may face struggles, but their ultimate trust needs to be in the God who can take care of them, like the mother of a weaned child.

Meaning

This psalm of confidence in God seeks to engender hope in the hearts of the congregation. Christian readers of the psalm, living in the aftermath of God's great redemptive acts, have arguably even stronger reasons to trust him. While David in certain periods of his life well illustrates the attitude of this psalm, Jesus does so perfectly and consistently. One might think of the episode in the Garden of Gethsemane as a time when he 'calmed and quietened' himself and adopted a child-like trust in God the Father.

Psalm 132. Remember David

Context

Psalm 132 does not fit neatly into just one genre. It is clearly a royal psalm, appealing to God on behalf of the Davidic dynasty and based on the covenant of kingship found in 2 Samuel 7. The psalm presupposes a problem that is not clearly described, but certainly explains the urgency with which the psalmist asks God to *remember David and his self-denial* in verse 1 and his appeal not to *reject your anointed one* (v. 10). Even so, the psalm exudes a confidence based on God's choice of David and his descendants as kings in Israel and the choice of Zion as the place where he will make his presence manifest. The request to *remember David* is probably in support of a later Davidic ruler.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120.

Comment

132:1. *Remember David*

After invoking God, the psalmist asks him to *remember David*. In the light of the rest of the psalm, this appeal is in the interests of David's descendants.

Remembrance extends beyond an act of cognition; it is an action. In essence, the psalmist calls on God not only to have a positive disposition towards the Davidic dynasty, but also to act positively on its behalf. According to the NIV, the second colon goes on to ask God specifically to remember his *self-denial*. Hilber points to the use of the same root ('*nh* II) in 1 Chronicles 22:14, where David says, 'I have taken great pains to provide for the temple of the LORD' and then goes on to list large quantities of precious metals, wood and stone that are dedicated to the future building of the temple (Hilber 2009: 427). Such self-denial in the interests of building a permanent lodging place for the ark of the covenant certainly fits with the content of the rest of the psalm. Rather than self-denial, other translations render the word 'hardships' (NRSV; NJB; ESV), 'adversity' (REB) or 'anxious care' (from '*nh* III, NAB). If these are correct, the appeal is broader and would refer to all of David's difficult life, from his conflicts with Saul onwards.

132:2–5. *David's promise*

This stanza recalls David's intense commitment to build a place where God is to

reside. He swore an oath/made a vow to the Lord, here designated by a name that evokes the idea of God as Warrior (*the Mighty One of Jacob*; Gen. 49:24; VanGemeren 2008: 926), which is appropriate for a psalm that gives a central place to the ark (see below). He will deny himself *sleep* (vv. 3–4) in the interest of constructing the holy place. We do not read these exact words that are here attributed to David in the historical books, but we see this attitude displayed in David's actions and speech as recounted in 2 Samuel 6 – 7. David first brings the ark to Jerusalem and then desires to construct a permanent *dwelling* for this potent symbol of God's presence among his people. While God does not allow him to build it, leaving that task to his son Solomon, David expends considerable energy and expense in preparing for the building of the temple (2 Chr. 22:2 – 29:9).

132:6–9. Arise, Lord

This stanza recounts David's efforts to bring the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6). The endeavour began in *Ephrathah*,^[161] another name for Bethlehem, the ancestral home of David. What he heard eventually took him to *Jaar* (Kiriath Jearim), where the ark was kept after having been returned by the Philistines, who had captured it in battle with the Israelite army under the leadership of the high priest Eli's corrupt sons (1 Sam. 4 – 6).

David's efforts to bring the ark to Jerusalem were not without trouble. The ark represented God's presence and, in particular, was closely associated with God as Warrior, which is why it often accompanied the army of Israel on the battlefield and why it is here called *the ark of your [God's] might*. When the ark was in the sanctuary, God's home/palace on earth, it was placed in the Holy of Holies and represented the *footstool* of his royal throne (see also 1 Chr. 28:2). In short, the ark was a potent symbol of God's presence. Even so, apparently David did not take care to secure the ark carefully in his first attempt to bring it to Jerusalem, and when it tottered, a man named Uzzah was killed by God as he attempted to stabilize it with his hand. After a period of time, David was encouraged by the blessing that came on the house where it was left and finally brought it to Jerusalem with great rejoicing (2 Sam. 6). The call for God to *arise* is typically found in warfare contexts and is appropriate here because of the ark's association with battle. In particular, it calls to mind the wilderness wanderings where Moses would begin a day's march, which would be led by priests carrying the ark, with the words:

Rise up, LORD!

May your enemies be scattered;
may your foes flee before you.

(Num. 10:35)

The stanza ends with a call for God to confer righteousness on the priests and joy on the people as they accompany the ark back to Jerusalem.

132:10–12. *David's descendants*

Verse 10 is best understood as a request for help for a royal descendant of David (*your anointed one*) based on the promise of a dynasty that God made to David. The promise is presented as a quotation from God that is substantially based in 2 Samuel 7:12–16. After David returned the ark to Jerusalem, he wanted to build a house (temple) for God, but God rejected his offer and instead conferred a house (dynasty of kings) on him. Here the psalmist appeals to that promise to enlist God's aid for one of David's later descendants, referred to as the *anointed one* (*māšîaḥ*, the Hebrew behind Messiah). Like the original covenantal promise, the psalm acknowledges that God's continued support of David's line is contingent on their obedience to the law of the Mosaic covenant (v. 12; cf. 2 Sam. 7:14).

132:13–16. *Zion*

The psalm now focuses on *Zion*, the place God chose for the construction of the temple and thus the spiritual centre of the world. Under Solomon, the temple becomes the place where the ark rests, where God makes his presence known among his people. He is King, so his home is a palace, and the Holy of Holies is his throne room. As a result, God, the benevolent King, will provide material and spiritual blessings on his people, paying special attention to the vulnerable (the *poor*) and Zion's leaders (the *priests*). The people will, accordingly, rejoice.

132:17–18. *David's strength*

The psalm opened with the request that God remember David, and now it ends with the divine commitment that he will indeed adopt a positive disposition and act accordingly towards his dynasty. *Horn* is a symbol of power, both political and military, and here God promises to enhance the power of the Davidic dynasty. A *lamp* guides the way in the darkness, and God here promises to be a lamp or guide to the king (*anointed one*). While the enemies of the dynasty will be shamed, the Davidic ruler will be honoured. Indeed, David's dynasty lasted as long as it did because God told David he would be a lamp before him (see 2 Sam. 21:17; 1 Kgs 11:36).

Meaning

Psalm 132 appeals for God's help for the anointed king, based on the covenant that God made with David in 2 Samuel 7. It recalls David's passion to make a house for God's presence, as symbolized in the ark.

The importance of Psalm 132 for Christian theology centres on the concern for the anointed king (or Messiah) and its connection to the Davidic covenant. God had promised David, in spite of the fact that he would discipline his wayward descendants, that 'your house and your kingdom shall endure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever' (2 Sam. 7:16). However, the Davidic dynasty came to a definite end with King Zechariah, when Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians in 586 BC. After that point, the royal psalms were read with an eschatological meaning. In the future, an anointed one, a Messiah and descendant of David, would assume the throne. Although Psalm 132 is not explicitly quoted in connection with Christ, other royal psalms are, including Psalms 2, 45, 89, 110.^{[162](#)}

Psalm 133. Living in unity

Context

Psalm 133 does not fit easily into a genre category, but is best considered a wisdom psalm. It teaches by making an observation: it celebrates unity and urges God's people to pursue it when it is lacking. The psalm continues with two striking similes that express the type of joy experienced among a unified people. The conclusion of the psalm draws our attention to Mount Zion, a favourite topic of these songs of ascent (125:1; 126:1; 128:5; 129:5; 132:13; 134:3), from which God issues his blessings.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120. This psalm adds an authorship ascription to David (see Introduction: Authorship titles, pp. 25–28).

Comment

133:1. *Living in unity*

The opening verse marvels at the pleasurable joy found *in unity* among *God's people*. The Hebrew behind the phrase 'God's people' (*'ahîm*) is literally 'brothers'. Brothers here can refer to children of the same father, but, in its broader sense, can refer to more distant relatives and even those who live together in a close-knit society or members of the same tribe or country. Israel's history had only brief periods when such unity was achieved, and then only imperfectly. Certainly, even the absence of unity can teach the blessing of unity. Strife demands more energy, whereas peaceful unity means the corporate body can reach common goals with less stress. If individuals cooperate, then their efforts are multiplied.

133:2–3. *How precious!*

The final verses present two striking similes that express the kind of pleasurable joy experienced by those who find corporate unity. The first image is of *precious oil* poured on the head of Aaron the high priest, which flows down on his beard and even onto his garments. While oil was widely used to moisten the skin in the dry climate of Israel, it was also used to anoint priests, kings and occasionally prophets to their office. It represented the gift of God's Spirit that would enable these important officials to exercise their responsibilities effectively. The choice

of Aaron confers *gravitas* on the image, which conveys relief from discomfort. Indeed, the Torah speaks about the ordination of Aaron to his office and the special oil poured on his head (Exod. 29:7, 21; 30:22–33; Lev. 8:2, 12). The picture of flowing oil shows its abundance and may also suggest a unifying of the different parts of Aaron: head, beard and clothing.

The second image also pictures a refreshing liquid (in this case, *dew*) flowing from one thing to another. While it would be physically possible to pour oil on Aaron's head and have it flow over his beard and clothing, the situation presented in verse 3 paints an imaginary scenario. *Mount Hermon* is the towering mountain, the only snow-capped peak in Israel, that marks the northern reaches of the nation. *Zion* is the hill in Jerusalem on which the temple sits. Hermon in the far north would have more dew than Zion, an area where there is considerably less precipitation. The picture of the dew of Hermon falling on dry, dusty Zion would be a pleasurable and happy situation.

The psalmist has also brought our attention to Zion. Although it is not as majestic as Hermon physically, it is the spiritual centre of the world. And it is from here that God bestows his blessing.

Meaning

This psalm teaches by making an observation: that unity among God's people (brothers) is pleasurable and evokes joy. As Firth points out, the psalmist urges proper behaviour by his observation without needing to exhort (Firth 2005: 168–169). The images of pleasurable experiences reinforce the motivation to pursue unity.

In those times when we experience unity among God's people, this prayer expresses our happiness. During periods of turmoil in the community, the prayer can be read as a yearning for unity.

The Christian reader of the psalm remembers Jesus' prayer that

...all of them [his present and future followers] may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.
(*John 17:21–23*)

Psalm 134. The Lord bless you

Context

The final song of ascent addresses the priests and Levites who serve during the night in the sanctuary. This short psalm is bound together by the repeated use of the verb ‘to bless’ (although the NIV translates its first occurrences as *praise*). Like Psalm 133, it concludes with a reference to Zion, from which God confers his blessings on his people.

The psalm is a hymn, in that it praises God while calling on the priests to offer praise. It is also a liturgical song, in that it calls on priests in the sanctuary to praise God.

For more on the title, see the excursus before Psalm 120.

Comment

134:1–2. Lift up your hands

The NIV obscures the connection between the first and second stanzas by translating the same verb (*brk*) as *praise* in the first stanza and *bless* in the second (see other versions, e.g. NRSV). This rendering is probably motivated by the idea that the superior blesses the inferior, and it is certainly true that the way in which humans bless God is by praising him. Here it is specifically the *servants of the LORD who minister by night in the house of the LORD*. In other words, the psalmist exhorts the night shift at the tabernacle or temple to praise God. Lifting one’s hands was a common gesture of prayer in ancient Israel. Hilber tells us that ‘priests and Levites served at all hours of the day and night. Evening duties included keeping the lampstand lit and the sacrifices burning as well as guarding the gates (Ex. 27:21; Lev. 6:9; 1 Chr. 9:22–27)’ (Hilber 2009: 430).

134:3. The Lord bless you

After exhorting the priests and Levites to ‘bless’ (*brk*, rendered *praise* in the NIV) the Lord, the psalmist now expresses the wish that God, who is the Creator of all things (*Maker of heaven and earth*), will bless them from *Zion*, the location of the temple (see commentary at 133:2–3). Blessing brings intimate relationship with God and others, as well as material benefits.

Meaning

The psalm calls on God's priests to bless (*praise*) God in the sanctuary and asks God to *bless* them in return. The psalmist may be a fellow priest or perhaps a non-priest, but his song could have been used by the congregation, who are exhorting the priests and Levites to attend enthusiastically to their duties, especially during the night when probably only a few were watching.

The New Testament teaches that all of Christ's disciples are priests. Peter informs his Christian readers, 'As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 2:4–5). Thus, this psalm encourages us, a holy priesthood, to lift up our hands in praise to our God and Saviour Jesus Christ (our 'spiritual sacrifices') in the assembly of believers (our 'spiritual house').

Psalm 135. The Lord is God and the Lord is great

Context

This hymn celebrates the goodness and greatness of God over all the other gods because of who he is (vv. 6–7) and his great acts of redemption (the exodus and conquest, vv. 8–12). All of Israel, and in particular the priests and Levites, are to join in the praise.

Comment

135:1–2. Praise the Lord!

Both the opening and closing of this song call on listeners to worship God by offering him their praise. In the introduction, the composer calls on them to praise the Lord's name. *The name of the LORD* (Yahweh) announces that he is 'I AM WHO I AM' (Exod. 3:14), the One who defines himself. God's name also connotes his reputation, a reputation which much of the remainder of the psalm will explicate as it describes God as Creator and Redeemer.

After an initial call to praise the Lord and specifically his name, the audience of this liturgical text is identified. First, they are called the *servants of the LORD*, but then in the next colon the identification is sharpened to reveal that they are the *ministers in the house of the LORD*, the priests and Levites who serve in God's sanctuary, his *house*. Thus, the psalm opens with a call to the priests and Levites to offer worship to God in the course of their duties at the sanctuary. A similar call to the priesthood may be found in 134:1.

135:3–4. God has chosen Israel

After repeating the call to praise God as well as his name (v. 3), the psalmist presents the first reason why God deserves such worship. He *has chosen Jacob/Israel* to be his own *treasured possession*. While the choice of the Hebrew people to be God's special people through whom he would reach the world goes back to the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), the use of both Jacob and Israel to name that people reminds us of the patriarch who was named Jacob at birth, but had his name changed to Israel after wrestling with God (Gen. 32:22–32). At Mount Sinai, God announced that Israel was his treasured possession, his own personal property. All the nations of the world are his, but Israel occupied a

special place as ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Exod. 19:5–6). For God’s choice of Israel, see Deuteronomy 7:7–11.

135:5–7. God is great

The psalmist then moves to extol God’s unparalleled greatness. He praises God by making a confession of his own personal belief (*I know that*). God is *greater than all gods*. Comparing God with other gods raises the question of the psalmist’s belief in monotheism. If God is greater than other gods, then there must be other gods with which to compare him. It is inadequate simply to say that he is comparing the true God to people’s imaginings of other gods. A better explanation is found in the fact that sometimes the Hebrew word for ‘God’ (*’ēlōhîm*) is used to refer to spiritual beings, including those created by God (elsewhere called angels and demons), and sometimes these created spiritual beings are worshipped by pagans (see Exod. 12:12 where the Egyptian gods are presented as real beings; see also commentary at Ps. 82).

But no matter what our conclusion on this issue, the psalm makes it absolutely clear that God is unique and that he is sovereign, totally free, omnipotent (he *does whatever pleases him*) and omnipresent (*in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths*). He also controls nature, most especially the *rain* that produces fertility. Further significance of this description is found in the fact that the false god that most rivalled the Lord for the people’s heart was Baal, the god of lightning and rain and clouds. Verse 7 emphasizes that the rain comes from the Lord, not Baal.

135:8–12. God the Warrior

The psalmist now rehearses the great acts of God in the past in order to stir the priestly congregation to continue their praise. He first of all remembers the climactic plague when God struck down the *firstborn* of Egypt, finally inducing Pharaoh to free the Israelites from bondage (Exod. 11 – 12). The *signs and wonders* against Pharaoh and his servants are a reference to all the plagues, which are attacks against the Egyptian gods (Exod. 12:12) and which culminated in the death of the firstborn. He then moves from the exodus to the conquest, beginning with a reference to the defeat of *Sihon* and *Og*, kings from the Transjordanian kingdoms of the *Amorites* and *Bashan* (Num. 21:21–35), and then there is a more general reference to the conquest (*all the kings of Canaan*; see the list in Josh. 12). While Israel fought, it was God the Warrior who gave them the victory and also the land, and thus it is he who deserves the praise.

135:13–14. God's reputation

God not only has a reputation (*name*) in the present, but it will last throughout all time. Verse 14 presumes that the people of God need vindication and compassion, meaning that they are in dire straits. If so, the psalmist remains confident that God will handle the problem.

135:15–18. Vain idols

We have already heard that God is 'greater than all gods' (v. 5), and now we hear that the *idols* are impotent. They are made by humans (v. 15b) and represent the gods. In the Ancient Near East, these ornate statues were not thought to be gods, but, through a certain ritual (the 'opening of the mouth'), they were seen as physical vehicles through which the gods made their presence known to the people (Walker and Dick 1999: 55–122). In short, these gods are blind, deaf and mute, as are their worshippers. See Psalm 115:6 for a similar expression.

135:19–21. Praise the Lord!

The final stanza, like the first, is a call to worship. But here the circle of worshippers is expanded right at the start. As in verses 1–2, the priests (here *house of Aaron*) and the Levites (*house of Levi*) are mentioned, but the first call goes to the whole Israelite community (*all you Israelites*), and the last refers to those who have the right attitude towards God (*you who fear him*). This praise is directed to the Lord who dwells in *Jerusalem* in the temple on Mount *Zion*. For a similar progression, see Psalm 115:9–11.

Meaning

Christians can also sing this hymn to celebrate God's nature and his great acts. Indeed, Christians, who are called 'priests' in the New Testament (see *Meaning* : Ps. 134), not only praise God for his great acts at the exodus and the conquest, but also for the greater exodus and conquest accomplished by Christ.

Psalm 136. His love endures forever

Context

The psalm is notable for its refrain: *His love endures for ever*, repeated as the second colon in every verse, giving the psalm a liturgical flavour. It is likely that the worship leader (presumably a priest) would speak the first half of the verse and the congregation would respond with the refrain, and in this way give praise to God. The word for ‘love’ (*hesed*) can be translated ‘loyalty’ and speaks of God’s commitment to honour his covenant with Israel. This commitment takes concrete form in the creation and more specifically in redemptive acts in history. Thus, Psalm 136 is commonly and correctly identified as a hymn, but more specifically it can be called a redemptive-historical psalm.

Comment

136:1–3. Give thanks

The first stanza calls on the congregation to thank God, based on his goodness (v. 1) and his superiority to the other gods (v. 2) and lords (v. 3). The implicit comparison to other gods requires comment. *God of gods* and *Lord of lords* are typical superlative constructions in Hebrew, but in order for these descriptions to make sense there have to be other gods and other lords for him to be the first in the class. As explained in the commentary on Psalm 82 and 135:15–18, sometimes ‘gods’ is used to refer to all spiritual beings, including angels and demons. The bottom line is that God is superior to all.

For the refrain (*his love endures for ever*), see *Context*.

136:4–9. He creates

The stanza begins by ascribing thanks to God who is unique in his *great wonders*. The great wonders will be specified in the following verses, beginning with the act of creation in this stanza. Verse 5 attributes God’s creation act to his wisdom (here the word is *understanding*, but it is connected to wisdom). The creation is ordered, not random. The assertion belies the thought that the universe is the result of pure chance. For a similar statement, see Proverbs 3:19–20:

Yahweh laid the foundations of the earth with Wisdom,

establishing the heavens with understanding.
With his knowledge the deeps burst open,
and the skies drop dew.
(Longman 2006: 138–139)

Verse 6 presents a picture of creation as God spreading out the *earth* (land) on the pre-existing waters (Gen. 1 pictures the land emerging from the water on day three) and making the lights, the moon and the sun (Gen. 1 pictures this as God's act on the fourth day).

For the refrain (*his love endures for ever*), see *Context*.

136:10–15. *He redeems*

The next 'great wonder' for which the liturgist calls for thanks is the exodus. He highlights the two most climactic moments in the story. As in the previous psalm (135:8), he celebrates the final plague, the death of the *firstborn*. It was on this evening that God had victory over the gods of Egypt (Exod. 12:12), finally compelling Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to leave their Egyptian bondage. God did it through his great power (*mighty hand and outstretched arm*). Soon after the Israelites left Egypt, an embarrassed and angry Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued them to the shores of the R(e)ed Sea. While Pharaoh thought he had trapped them in a vulnerable spot, God had actually directed Moses to go there in order to display his great glory by defeating the Egyptians in such a dramatic fashion (Exod. 14:17–31). We hear how God split the impassable sea and allowed Israel to escape, while closing the sea on the Egyptians in a single act of judgment and redemption. In response, Moses leads Israel in a song that extols God as a 'warrior' who fought on behalf of his helpless people (Exod. 15:3).

For the refrain (*his love endures for ever*), see *Context*.

136:16. *He guides*

After the people of Israel have passed through the sea, they find themselves in the *wilderness*. The psalmist here is not concerned to talk about all the ups and (mostly) downs of the wilderness wanderings (the account of which begins with Exod. 15:22 and extends to the end of Deuteronomy). Rather, he chooses to focus on God's guidance during this period. We read in Exodus 13:21 that 'The LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night.' He also made his presence known in the ark of the covenant that went ahead of the Israelites as they journeyed (Num. 10:33–36).

For the refrain (*his love endures for ever*), see *Context*.

136:17–22. *He conquers*

The psalmist continues the flow of redemptive history by now thanking God for the gift of the land through conquest and settlement (Joshua). He speaks generally of the kings of Canaan (see Josh. 12), but then, as in Psalm 135 (v. 11), he specifies the victories in the Transjordan region over Sihon and Og (see commentary at 135:10–12). As the account in Numbers 21:21–35 makes clear, these victories are the result of God’s warring activity.

For the refrain (*his love endures for ever*), see *Context*.

136:23–26. *He provides*

The psalmist closes his call to thanks with general statements describing God’s actions for his people. The Lord remembered them when they were down (*in our low estate*). Remembrance means more than mental recall, and implies his actions to alleviate their sufferings. Verse 24 then specifies those actions as a deliverance from enemies, as the exodus and conquest both describe more concretely. And God continues to care for them in the routine and everyday provision of food. Verse 26 issues a final general call for thanksgiving.

For the refrain (*his love endures for ever*), see *Context*.

Meaning

God’s love does indeed endure forever. In Psalm 136, the psalmist looks back to creation and then to those great acts in history whereby God demonstrated that love to his people. He calls on the covenant community to join him in worshipping God through an act of celebration that recalls these events.

His love endures forever, and Christian readers of Psalm 136 can look back over a longer expanse of the history of God’s redemptive intrusion and continue the celebration. Of course, that redemption climaxes in Jesus Christ. We are able to look back and see God’s ultimate redemptive act that took place on the cross. The psalmist also had a forward-looking perspective. He expected redemption in the future. We too look forward to the return of Christ and the fulfilment of the redemption accomplished on the cross.

Psalm 137. By the rivers of Babylon

Context

By the rivers of Babylon (v. 1), *our captors* (v. 3) and other specific references hint at a particular historical occasion for the composition of this psalm, which is not typical, since most psalms are historically vague in order to be applied again and again to new situations. The event specified is the aftermath of the Babylonian exile that took place in the sixth century BC (either 597 or 586 BC). The captives, probably Levitical musicians, bemoan their separation from the temple. Psalm 137 is clearly a corporate lament.

Comment

137:1–3. *By the rivers of Babylon*

The main *rivers of Babylon* are the Euphrates and the Tigris, although there are also smaller tributaries that run through that land which is located in what is now southern Iraq. Babylon is far from *Zion*, the mountain in Jerusalem on which the temple sat. The temple is God's dwelling on earth and thus represents his presence among his people. Because they are far from this locale of worship, they hung up the instruments (*harps*) that they used to worship God. They are certainly exiled Israelites, and very likely the psalmist speaks on behalf of temple musicians.

To add insult to injury, their captors demand that they sing *one of the songs of Zion*. Since Zion was the place where God made his presence known, there were songs that worshipped God by praising Zion (see Pss 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122). Of course, their captors had no interest in praising God. Their intention was to mock their prisoners by mocking their God.

137:4–6. *If I forget Jerusalem*

The speakers (*we*) respond with a rhetorical question that indicates their inability to sing for their captors. How can they celebrate Zion when they are captives in a foreign land? They will not sing, but neither will they *forget* Jerusalem. They take on themselves a self-malediction: *May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth* (and thus not be able to sing) if they forget Jerusalem, the city in which Zion is located. Indeed, not only will they not forget Jerusalem; they will

consider it the source of their *highest joy*.

137:7–9. Destroy the Edomites

They will remember Jerusalem and they call on God to remember *Edom*. At the time of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, Edom, located south of Moab in the region to the south-east of the Dead Sea, had taken advantage of the situation in some way. While not precisely described, this point can be established by reference to texts like the present one, as well as to Lamentations 4:22; Ezekiel 35:15; Obadiah 10–14.

The psalm then confers a blessing on those who *repay* them for their crimes against God's people and in particular for those who violently kill their *infants*. For imprecations, see Introduction, pp. 51–52.

Meaning

Psalm 137 laments the corporate suffering of Judah after God allowed Babylon to defeat it and exile its leading citizens, including priests and rabbis. It calls on God not to let them forget Jerusalem, which includes a yearning and expectation that they will ultimately return (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah). In the meantime, they call on God to avenge them in the matter of the Edomites who took advantage of their weakened condition.

The more specific historical references make it difficult for Christians to use the psalm. However, in the yearning to be in Jerusalem, the Christian can think of the new Jerusalem, heaven itself (Rev. 21 – 22). Christians should remain mindful that they are not yet 'home' with God.

Psalm 138. With all my heart

Context

This psalm is the first of eight Davidic psalms (see Introduction: Authorship titles, pp. 25–28). Here the psalmist thanks God for answering his prayers and calls on the kings of the earth to join in the praise.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

138:1–3. I will praise you

The psalmist expresses his intention to *praise the LORD*, and by doing so he does praise him with full sincerity and enthusiasm (*with all my heart*). The verb ‘praise’ here could also be translated ‘thank’, and perhaps this is preferable since this is a thanksgiving psalm (see NRSV).

The psalmist commits to praising/thanking God before the ‘*gods*’. The NIV places quotation marks around *gods* to indicate that these gods are not on an equal footing with the true God of Israel. Sometimes the Bible uses ‘gods’ (*’ēlōhîm*) to refer to all spiritual beings, even created ones that are sometimes called angels and demons (see Exod. 12:12; Ps. 82 for other examples). The psalmist worships towards the temple (v. 2a). Even someone who is far from the temple, like Daniel (Dan. 6:10), will bow towards the temple when in prayer or worship. After all, this is the place where God makes his presence known in the midst of his people.

The remainder of verse 2 speaks of the specific focus and motivation for the psalmist’s praise. He will praise God’s *name*, since his name represents his character and his actions. Indeed, the word ‘name’ (*šēm*) could be translated ‘reputation’. God’s character is described by words such as *unfailing love* (or loyalty [*ḥesed*]), the same word translated simply as ‘love’ in the refrain of Ps. 136) and *faithfulness*, words that are closely connected to the covenant God made with his people and his commitment to displaying his love and faithfulness to Israel. These descriptions of God’s character issue forth in beneficial action towards his people.

The translation and interpretation of the last parallel line of verse 2 (*for you have so exalted your solemn decree that it surpasses your fame*) is debatable and

enigmatic. It is questionable whether ‘decree’ is the best translation (see also v. 4) for the Hebrew word (*’imrâ*). ‘Promise’ is a better choice, and a more fitting translation of the line is: ‘for you have exalted above all things your name and your promise’. God keeps his promises, which includes answering the psalmist’s prayers (v. 3).

138:4–5. Let kings praise you

The psalmist then expresses the hope that his praise/thanksgiving for God will extend beyond himself, and indeed, beyond the borders of Israel. God is the God of the entire world and thus deserves the praise of *all the kings of the earth*. This praise will happen when they hear all that God *has decreed* (better, ‘promised’; see comment above).

138:6–8. God helps the vulnerable

The psalmist stands amazed that such a great God cares for the vulnerable (*the lowly*). He counts himself among their number since he is in *the midst of trouble*. But God takes care of him and fights off his foes. The psalmist ends with an appeal to God not to abandon him in the midst of the fray.

Meaning

The psalmist thanks God for answering his prayer. He praises God for his great name and his wonderful promises. He loves the Lord for taking care of the vulnerable, and he calls on the kings of the earth to join in the praise.

During the Old Testament period, the kings of the earth did not praise God; if anything, they resisted and challenged him (Pss 2 and 48). However, when Christ came, the gospel began to spread throughout the earth. Revelation 21:24 pictures the end of time when the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into the new Jerusalem.

Psalm 139. Search me, Lord

Context

Psalm 139 is one of the best-known and beloved psalms in the collection. It is often read as a calm reflection on God's omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence and how these awesome divine qualities elicit wonder and comfort from the composer. Such a reading simplifies the psalm and ignores the final stanza (vv. 19–24), which is an intense statement of hatred towards the psalmist's dangerous enemies and includes an appeal to God to realize that the psalmist is innocent. Moreover, the first three stanzas (vv. 1–6, 7–12, 13–18) themselves express ambivalence about God's pervasive knowledge, presence and power. In the light of its final stanza, the psalm is best considered a lament.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

139:1–6. You hem me in

At the end of the psalm, the composer wants God to search him and find him devoid of any offensive way (vv. 23–24). He begins, though, with a positive statement that God has indeed *searched* him and knows him. Indeed, he knows that there is nothing that he does or thinks that is beyond God's purview. He describes God's comprehensive and omniscient knowledge with a series of merisms (pairs of opposites that denote everything in between). God knows his every action, from his sitting to his standing up, from his *going out* (action) to his *lying down* (resting). He knows everything (*all my ways*) about him. He even knows what the psalmist is going to say before he utters the statement (v. 4).

The psalmist clearly understands that God knows him completely and thoroughly. The question remains as to whether God's knowledge is comforting or upsetting to him. Is it good or bad that God *hems* him *in* completely (using another merism [*before and behind*])? The verb (*šûr*) is often used of a siege (1 Sam. 23:8; 2 Sam. 20:15). Someone who is hemmed in is confined and enclosed, so the statement could be taken negatively. Of course, it could also be read in a very positive light. Although the verb is not used in Job 1:10, the Accuser tells God that the only reason why Job maintains his relationship with him is because God places 'a hedge around him and his household and

everything he has'. In other words, God protects Job from trouble and showers him with material blessings. The same ambiguity surrounds the second colon of verse 5 (*you lay your hand upon me*). Again, is this a good thing or a bad thing? Is the hand on him to guide or to punish (see Ps. 38:2b; Broyles 1999: 485). Is the psalmist's awareness of God's extensive knowledge of him *too wonderful* or marvellous for him (one meaning of *pele'*), or too difficult and overwhelming for him (another meaning)?

139:7–12. Where can I go?

The rhetorical questions that open the second stanza support a negative reading of the psalmist's tone in the first stanza. They imply that there is nowhere he can escape God's presence. He cannot get away. The psalmist's attitude is reminiscent of that of Jonah who wanted to get away from God, but could not because God is present everywhere, including the raging sea. If the first stanza emphasized the omniscience of God, the second illustrates his omnipresence, once again using merisms. God is in the *heavens* as well as in the *depths* (and everywhere in between). God is in the east (*the wings of the dawn*,¹⁶³ where the sun rises) and in the west (*the far side of the sea*, referring to the Mediterranean) and everywhere in between. Read in isolation, verse 10 seems very positive. God *guides* and protects (*your right hand will hold me fast*) the psalmist, but the context may lend a negative connotation. That is, he may be complaining about divine coercion. After all, verses 11–12 express his desire to hide from God, as well as his awareness that it is impossible to do so because God can make *the night shine like the day*.

139:13–18. You know me

Although the psalmist may be ambivalent about the extent of God's knowledge and the scope of his presence, he certainly has no doubts that God is and has been with him from the very beginning and that he knows him thoroughly. After all, it was God who created him. God did not simply create humanity and then withdraw, as though natural processes alone accounted for the birth of future generations. No, God is intimately involved in the birth of all his human creatures. And the result is amazing, as the psalmist considers that he is *fearfully and wonderfully made*. God's knowledge of the psalmist even extends to the time before he was conceived (*your eyes saw my unformed body*). He not only knows the psalmist's distant past, but also his future, a statement about God's foreknowledge. Knowing the vastness of God's thoughts (vv. 17–18, where they *outnumber the grains of sand*) overwhelms the psalmist.

139:19–24. Vindicate me

In a rather surprising turn (at least to the modern reader), the psalmist now vents his hatred and anger towards the wicked, who are bloodthirsty and therefore dangerous. They must present a specific threat to the psalmist, since they seem to provoke his stress and worry (v. 23). He calls on God not only to kill the wicked, but also to search him to proclaim his innocence and then presumably to remove the danger from his life. While the first part of the psalm may express ambivalence about being in God's presence, knowledge and power, the conclusion expresses a 'reasoned surrender to God's pursuit' (Broyles 1999: 487). The psalmist concludes with a request that God lead him in the way everlasting. The 'way' is a frequent metaphor for life in wisdom literature, which speaks of two ways, here in contrast to the wicked way that leads to death.

Meaning

The psalmist was anxious about wicked people who threatened his life. He understood that God knew him thoroughly and intimately. He knew that God was present with him wherever he went and that God was all powerful, although initially he expressed ambivalence about the fact that God hemmed him in and he could not get away. At the end of the psalm, he surrenders to God and puts his hope in him.

Like the psalmist, Paul knew that the Christian life was difficult and that the Christian faced many threats. In response, Paul reminds his readers:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

‘For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Rom. 8:31–39)

Psalm 140. Justice for the poor

Context

Psalm 140 is clearly an individual lament, with its appeals to God to listen and rescue (vv. 1, 4, 8), its complaints concerning the wicked who intend to harm the psalmist (vv. 2–3, 5), its imprecation (vv. 9–11) and its note of confidence (vv. 6–7, 12–13). The psalmist's distress appears to be because of false accusations in a court of law (vv. 12–13), which explains the psalmist's statements about the threatening speech of the evildoers (v. 3). That said, the language of battle could imply a war setting, although it could also be taken metaphorically (see vv. 2, 7). In other words, the enemy wages war against the psalmist by making false accusations against him in court.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

140:1–3. Rescue me!

The lament begins with an appeal to God for help and protection against evil people who are attacking the psalmist. Verse 1b specifies that these *evildoers* are *violent*; they want to inflict physical harm on him. They premeditate their attacks (*devise evil plans in their hearts*). Their violence is perpetrated most frighteningly by their speech. Indeed, their speech can kill like the *poison* of a snake's bite.

140:4–5. Protect me

The second stanza renews the psalmist's call for God to *protect* him (v. 4b, repeating v. 1b). He describes his opponents, using the analogy of people who trap game and birds or net fish. Their tools are the *snare*, the *net* and *traps* that they have hidden in order to capture their prey, in this case the psalmist himself (see similar imagery in Pss 91:3; 124:7; Prov. 1:8–19; 6:5; Jer. 5:26; Hos. 9:8). The imagery suggests evil intent to harm, as well as deceit.

140:6–8. You are my God

After describing the danger he faces, the psalmist reaffirms his commitment to God ('*You are my God*'), and on that basis appeals to God to hear his prayer

(v. 6). He understands that God is his deliverer, the One who protects (*shields*) his head in the time of *battle*. The reference to battle could be literal or metaphorical. He is definitely in a battle with the evildoers who want to harm him. He then asks God not to fulfil the *desires* of the wicked, which would most especially include their desire to trap and hurt the psalmist. Only God can thwart their plans.

140:9–11. Destroy the enemy

The psalmist now wishes harm on those who want to harm him. He wants them to suffer the fate that they are trying to impose on him. Earlier, the wicked were described as arrogant (v. 5a), and so we are not surprised that they proudly *rear their heads* when they surround the psalmist. They are very confident in their attack, and the psalmist knows that he cannot handle them in his own power. For this reason, he calls on God to come to his aid. He asks that the harm (*mischief*) that they intended for him might overwhelm (*engulf*) them, a prayer shaped by Deuteronomy 19:15–20 which mandates that false witnesses should receive the punishment they had planned for those whom they had wrongly accused. The idea of the mischief intended by the wicked coming back to bite them is found in a number of places in the Old Testament (Pss 7:14–16; 9:15; 35:7–8; Prov. 1:8–19). The psalmist calls for a variety of disasters to fall on the wicked, including having burning coals fall on their head (Prov. 25:22), being thrown into a fire or getting stuck in a miry pit.

140:12–13. God protects the vulnerable

The psalmist concludes on a confident note. He is certain that God will care for those who are *poor* and in need, among whom he surely counts himself. The needy poor must also be the righteous, because they are the ones who respond in praise and who get to live in God's presence. The psalmist's confidence that God will secure justice for the needy poor implies that the psalmist himself is in a position where he needs God to act on his behalf. The language (*secures justice; the cause of the needy*) implies a legal case.

Meaning

The psalmist petitions God to help him when he is faced with false accusations that have potentially dangerous consequences for him. Evildoers are trying to trap him in order to harm him. In spite of this, the psalmist has confidence that God will rescue him, because God sides with the vulnerable righteous person over against arrogant wicked people.

Jesus himself was the subject of false accusations that led to his crucifixion (see John 18:19 – 19:37). One can imagine Jesus praying this prayer. However, rather than uttering imprecations against his attackers, he prayed, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34). Like the psalmist, Jesus expressed his utter confidence in God, even in the face of death. He tells the criminal being crucified by his side, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise’ (Luke 23:43).

Paul cites verse 3 of our psalm, along with a number of other passages from the Old Testament, to make the point that human beings are sinful (Rom. 3:13).

Psalm 141. My prayer like incense

Context

The *Comment* section will point out many connections between this psalm and the wisdom tradition (particularly the book of Proverbs). This psalm is an individual lament, in which the psalmist calls for the destruction of the wicked who press him, and also asks God to regulate his speech. He affirms his devotion to God.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

141:1–2. Like incense

The psalm begins on an urgent note. The psalmist prays, pleading with God to answer quickly by drawing close to him (*come quickly to me*), and asks that his prayer receive a favourable reception from God. He desires that his prayer be *like incense* before God (v. 2a) and *like the evening sacrifice* (v. 2b). He reveals that his prayer posture is to lift his hands heavenwards as he appeals to God, thus expressing his openness to him. Incense and evening sacrifice come from the realm of formal worship (Exod. 29:38–42; 30:34–38), which would also be the primary setting of the psalm. Perhaps evening (as opposed to morning) sacrifice is mentioned here because his prayer is being offered in the evening. In any case, the incense is intended to present a sweet fragrance before the Lord, and so the psalmist wants his prayer similarly to please God.

141:3–4. Guard my mouth and heart

Rather than asking God to take action against his enemies, the psalmist first calls on God to keep him from sinning with his speech. He wants a *guard* who will keep inappropriate words from passing through his lips. Like the author of Proverbs, he realizes that speech is dangerous and can do much harm (Prov. 10:6; 12:6; 22:10, etc.). He goes on to ask God to protect not only his words, but also his *heart*. The wise person knows that words reveal what is in the heart (Prov. 12:23; 16:23; 18:4), so if his heart is not evil, then neither will his words be. Evil words and an evil heart will lead to wicked deeds (v. 4cd), and the psalmist does not want that for himself. Indeed, he does not want to associate

himself in any way with these evildoers (taking the advice from the father to the son in Prov. 1:8–19). He recognizes that the way of the wicked has its attractions, so he beseeches God to help him resist the *delicacies* that wickedness offers.

141:5. *The discipline of the righteous*

Another important teaching from the book of Proverbs is to accept criticism and correction (Prov. 10:17; 12:1; 29:1; Heb. 12:1–13), even if it involves physical discipline. A wise person grows in wisdom by accepting the rebuke of another (‘rebuke the wise and they will love you’, Prov. 9:8).

141:6–7. *The punishment of the wicked*

Rather than calling on God to destroy the wicked rulers, the psalmist confidently states that they will meet a violent end. The wicked rulers will not succeed, but will be thrown down from the cliffs. They will acknowledge the words of the psalmist (*the wicked will learn that my words were well spoken*) and will see their demise (*As one ploughs and breaks up the earth, so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of the grave*).

141:8–10. *Keep me safe*

The psalmist appeals to God to keep him safe from the evil-doers, based on his steadfast relationship with him. After all, he turns to God for protection (*in you I take refuge*). As in the previous psalm, the psalmist utilizes hunting imagery, asking to be saved from the *traps* and *snares* of the wicked. He also wants the wicked to be caught up in their own schemes (see 140:5 and passages cited there).

Meaning

The psalmist prays that God will keep his speech pure and also that he will destroy the wicked who are trying to harm him. This lament begins with a wish that God would receive his prayer immediately and favourably. The latter is communicated by a powerful image that likens his prayer to incense and the evening sacrifice. He wants his prayer to be acceptable. Christians know that their prayers are often inadequate. Paul encourages his readers in this regard, when he writes, ‘...the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because

the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God' (Rom. 8:26–27). In other words, the Spirit assures us that God will receive our prayers favourably.

The imagery also reminds us of the opening of the seventh seal in the book of Revelation:

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

(Rev. 8:3–5)

The picture is of judgment against the wicked of the world. God receives the prayers of his suffering people favourably as they call for help against the wicked and then hurls judgment from heaven to earth. The saints 'have been crying out for vindication (6:10), and though the final judgment is not yet (6:11), some of their vindication occurs within history' (Keener 2002: 255).

Psalm 142. No refuge but you

Context

The psalm is a lament by an individual who is in deep distress and feeling lonely in the face of those who pursue him. He cries to God, *Set me free from my prison* (v. 7a), which could be literal or figurative, but is likely the latter if the historical title (the only historical title outside the first two books of the Psalms) reflects the occasion that led to the poem's composition. David found himself in a cave more than once (see 1 Sam. 22:1; 24:3). However, the first occasion is more likely, since he had recently escaped from Saul and was in the cave of Adullam. The latter occasion was when he was heavily supported and had a moral victory over Saul who was pursuing him.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

142:1–2. I cry to the Lord

The psalmist opens with testimony concerning his appeal to God for help in the midst of his distress.

142:3–4. No-one cares

His only help in this time of distress is God, who watches over his life. He describes his emotional state as his spirit growing faint, probably referring to deep disappointment or depression. The terms *way/path* are well known in wisdom literature as a metaphor for one's life journey. While God helps in life, people do not. The psalmist has no-one at his *right hand*, an associate or ally to help him in the struggles of his life. Indeed, other people only intensify his trouble. The psalmist communicates this latter point by the use of hunter imagery again (*snare*, v. 3d; see 140:5; 141:9–10).

142:5. You are my portion

Although other people do not provide him with *refuge* from life's troubles (v. 4), God does. He refers to God as his portion (*hēleq*). The noun comes from the verb 'to divide' (*hlq*) and is used to refer to the apportionment of plunder (Gen. 14:24) and food (Lev. 6:17), but most often to the division and distribution of

land (*NIDOTTE* 2: 162). However, the psalmist knows that what is truly important to him is not food, land or material possessions, but only God.

142:6–7. Set me free

The psalm ends with a plea for God's help in the midst great trouble. The psalmist is being persecuted (pursued), and he is aware that he lacks the resources to rescue himself. He also knows that God is more than able to help him, so he turns to him. He promises that he will worship God if God does set him free from his distress. *Prison* here is probably metaphorical; the machinations of his enemies have served to confine him and bring suffering into his life. And when God does save him, he will praise God's name, and furthermore, other righteous people will gather around him so they can offer community worship.

Meaning

The psalm is the plaintive cry of an individual who is without resources or strength and who turns to God for help. This person is being pursued, and his situation is like being in prison. He envisions a time, after God has helped him, when the righteous will then rally around him. Hossfeld and Zenger point out that the church over the years has heard in this psalm the voice of the 'persecuted and suffering Christ'.¹⁶⁴

Psalm 143. No-one is righteous before you

Context

The psalmist laments his difficult and dangerous situation as his enemies seek to destroy him. He calls on God to help him. He acknowledges his faults, and thus this psalm is often listed as one of the penitential psalms, along with Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130. However, the penitential tone is not emphasized, as in Psalm 51, for instance, since the psalmist is quick to point out to God that no-one is perfect (v. 2).

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

143:1–4. *The enemy pursues me*

The psalmist appeals to God to hear his prayer. His appeal is on the grounds of God's *faithfulness and righteousness*. These divine qualities are revealed in his covenant with his people, and they mean that he will follow through with his promise to be God to his people and to protect them from their enemies. While the psalmist is aware that no-one is perfectly righteous (v. 2), he does believe that he has grounds for saying that he does not deserve the violent treatment of those who are persecuting (*pursuing*) him. That said, verse 2 does indicate that the psalmist has an awareness of his faults and that God could justify punishing him, so he appeals to God's grace. He also petitions God for help by describing the enemy's horrific actions towards him. Verse 3 describes how they chase him, and when they overtake him, they crush him and then bury him as if he were dead. The psalmist hopes to move God to compassion by this figurative description of the depravations of the enemy. He is depressed and anxious (*my spirit grows faint*; see also 142:3a).

143:5–7. *I remember*

The psalmist looks to the past to find confidence to live in a troubled present and to engender hope for the future (see Ps. 77:11–20). After all, considering God's works in the past (*days of long ago*) would bring to mind the numerous times when God saved his helpless people, but perhaps none more dramatic than the crossing of the R(e)d Sea. Caught between an angry Pharaoh and his elite

chariot troop and an impassable sea, God opened up a path for them through the waters to safety. The psalmist, knowing his own inability to save himself, now calls on the God of the exodus to do so. God's hands have worked wonders, so the psalmist spreads his hands towards heaven in a posture of prayer and appeals to God to intervene. He compares his intense need for God to that of a *parched land* that desperately needs the rains (see Ps. 42:1). In his desperation, he asks God to respond quickly. God's face is a metaphor for his presence, and if God chooses to hide his face, the psalmist will be a dead person (*like those who go down to the pit*).

143:8–10. *Rescue me*

He hopes to have the divine answer by morning, perhaps implying that he is uttering this prayer at night-time, when troubles often make it impossible to sleep. He again implicitly appeals to the covenant where God promises his *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *hesed*) to his people. He asks God to be the guide of his life (*show me the way I should go*). Just as a child may hide behind a parent for protection, so the psalmist wants to hide in God. He commits himself to following God's will and asks that God's Spirit would make his life stable again (*lead me on level ground*).

143:11–12. *Preserve my life*

In the concluding stanza, the psalmist makes a final appeal for help and also for the destruction of his enemies (see Introduction: Imprecations, pp. 51–52).

Meaning

The psalmist appeals to God for help against a vicious enemy. He acknowledges his faults, but appeals to God's grace and asks God not to judge him (v. 2). After all, the psalmist insists, no-one living is righteous before God. According to Hossfeld and Zenger, verse 2 of our psalm lies behind both Romans 3:20 and Galatians 2:16, which 'are at the heart of the Pauline doctrine of justification' (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011: 578). Indeed, we are all sinful, and our only hope is to throw ourselves on God's mercy as offered through Christ.

Psalm 144. He trains my hand for war

Context

Psalm 144 is a royal psalm in which the king praises God for his warring activity on behalf of his kingdom. The Lord is the king's Protector and thus guards the community. Verses 5–8 suggest that there is a present crisis to which the psalmist asks God to respond. He wants God to rout the enemy and save him from their lies. The psalm ends with a reflection on the blessed condition of those whom God does save from trouble.

Psalm 144 bears a number of similarities to Psalm 18. Note, for instance, the similar opening divine epithets (18:1; 144:1–2) and the description of God's violent descent from heaven (18:5–15; 144:5–8). One difference is that in Psalm 18 the psalmist (identified as David) thanks God for saving him, while in Psalm 144 the psalmist (also identified as David) requests God to save him.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

144:1–2. My Protector

The king worships his warring God. The metaphors all indicate God's ability to protect. Most are explicitly military. He is the psalmist's *fortress* (see 18:2; 28:8, etc.), his *stronghold* (9:9; 18:2, etc.), his *deliverer* (18:2; 40:17, etc.) and his *shield* (3:3; 5:12; 7:10; 18:2, 30, 35). God as *Rock* is not military, but rather is a metaphor of protection (18:2). He is the rock 'that is higher than I' (see Ps. 61:2), a rock-faced cliff that provides refuge from attack. The psalmist attributes all his battle skills to God's enabling. As a result of God's protection and training, the psalmist is able to subdue his enemies. All of this flows from God's love (*He is my loving God*; the Hebrew root *hesed* indicates the loyalty that flows out of his covenant love).

144:3–4. What are human beings?

As in Psalm 8, the psalmist marvels at the level of concern that God shows his people, in spite of the fact that humans are temporary and ephemeral like a *breath* or a passing *shadow*.

144:5–8. Come down, Lord

In Psalm 18, a thanksgiving song, the psalmist thanks God for parting the heavens and coming down to save him. However, Psalm 144 is a lament, so rather than an indicative, the psalmist uses an imperative to call on God to come down from heaven to his rescue. He wants him to come as a Warrior and make the mountains *smoke* (volcano imagery), to send his *lightning* (storm-god imagery), shoot his *arrows* (Divine-Warrior imagery) and scatter the enemy. The description suggests God swooping down on his cloud chariot to shoot the enemy with his arrows (*lightning*), and then reaching out his hand to save him. The *mighty waters* are the waters of chaos that often suggest evil, going back to Ancient Near Eastern creation myths where the creator god (Marduk, Baal) defeats the sea monster (Tiamat, Yam, Lotan [Leviathan]). The waters represent the human foes (*foreigners*) who threaten the stability of God's people. They are liars.

144:9–11. A new song

For *new song* as a hymn of victory, see Psalm 98:1. When God 'parts the heavens' to rescue the psalmist (vv. 5–8), the psalmist will respond by singing praises to the Divine Warrior. God gives victory to *kings*, in particular to *David* (also named in the title as the composer). After all, David is the king whom God chose because of his heart (1 Sam. 16:7). God also establishes the kingdom of David's descendants (2 Sam. 7:11–16). The psalmist calls on this God to save him from his present distress as he faces enemies who lie to him (v. 11).

144:12–15. Then we will be blessed

At present, the psalmist and his community are under attack. He calls on God to intervene and establish peace by destroying the enemy. Once God has done that, their situation will be drastically changed. In short, they will be *blessed*. Human beings were created and placed in a blessed condition (Genesis 2), although the fall fractured their relationship with God and they were removed from that blessed state. God sought to restore their blessing through his covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). Blessing in the Old Testament begins with a harmonious relationship with God, leading to harmonious relationships with the community.^[165] It also means vibrant families that are themselves productive (*our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants*), dignified and beautiful (*our daughters will be like pillars carved to adorn a palace*). They will not be the object of warfare (v. 14c–d) and they will have plenty of food (vv. 13–14a).

Meaning

Above, we observed the similarity between Psalms 18 and 144. In our treatment of Psalm 18, we noted that the prayer thanking God for intervening as Warrior in the midst of conflict could be a model prayer for the Christian who is enmeshed in a spiritual battle (Eph. 6:10–20). Thus, Psalm 144, which calls on God to come and save from heaven, can also be used by Christians suffering from the struggles of life and in need of their protector God.

In an interesting article, Klingbeil charts psalms that speak of God as Warrior and notes that there is a declining use of that metaphor as we move from the beginning to the end of the Psalter, a movement that he also believes reflects a rough chronological development from pre-exilic to post-exilic times. Psalm 144, in his estimation a post-exilic psalm, is an exception and thus reinstitutes the metaphor in expectation that the God who warred for David (Ps. 18) would come again and restore the community (Klingbeil, 2010). The New Testament understands that the Divine Warrior came in the person of Jesus, who comes to fight a spiritual battle (not with sword and spear) and will come again to defeat all human and spiritual enemies once and for all (Rev. 19:11–21; Longman and Reid 1995: 191–192).

Psalm 145. Your kingdom is everlasting

Context

This is the last of the acrostic songs (see Introduction, p. 46) in the Psalter.¹⁶⁶ The psalm is a hymn that extols God as King and as the One who provides for his vulnerable people. It draws on God's great acts and celebrates his everlasting kingdom as the motivation for praise.

For the title, see the Introduction.

Comment

145:1–2. *God the King*

The psalmist opens by stating his determination to praise God daily and enthusiastically (communicated throughout the psalm by the repetition of words like *praise*, *exalt* and *extol*) forever. God is his *King* and thus deserves his worship. The focus is on God's *name*, which refers to his nature as well as the reputation garnered by his works.

145:3–7. *Worthy of praise*

The Lord is *great* and thus he deserves praise (note the use of the opening line of Ps. 48). It is beyond human ability to grasp God completely, but his people can know enough to pass down the accounts of his great acts from generation to generation. God's *wonderful works* would include redemptive events like the exodus and the crossing of the sea (Exod. 14 – 15). These acts are not only of antiquarian interest, but also have existential significance, since they tell God's people that he can act on their behalf in the present. His past acts establish a track record that builds up the confidence of his people. Thus, they can praise him.

Note that the accounts of these great acts are passed down from one generation to the next (v. 4a). Deuteronomy 6:4–9 speaks of fathers teaching their sons the commandments of God. Psalm 78 expands on the idea in verse 4a when the psalmist says that he will tell of:

things we have heard and known,
things our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their descendants;
we will tell the next generation

the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
(78:3–4)

In verses 5 and 6, there is an interplay between *they* in colon a and *I* in colon b, which refers to the previous generations informing the psalmist of God's great acts and the psalmist responding with praise.

145:8. Gracious and compassionate

Through his great acts, God reveals himself as *gracious, compassionate*, patient (*slow to anger*) and loving. The word *love* here (*hesed*) is connected to the covenant and specifically pinpoints the love felt by one covenant partner for another. It is a loyal love that points to God's actions on behalf of his people. These qualities of God are found in a number of contexts in the Old Testament (most notably Exod. 34:6, but also 2 Chr. 30:9; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; Joel 2:13).

145:9–13a. An everlasting kingdom

God's attitude towards his creation (*all he has made*) is compassionate, and his actions are good. Thus, the whole creation (*all your works*) praises him (v. 10a) and, in particular, God's *faithful people* (a nice example of the second colon sharpening the first colon). For the inanimate creation's praising God, see Psalm 98:7–9.

As we have previously observed (v. 1), the psalm pictures God as King, and now the King's *kingdom* is described as *glorious* (vv. 11a, 12) and *everlasting* (v. 13). God's kingdom is not restricted to Israel, but extends to the whole world, even though at present the whole world does not recognize it. Daniel explains Nebuchadnezzar's vision of a large statue made of a variety of metals which was destroyed by a rock, not cut by human hands, as the kingdom of God defeating evil human kingdoms. He points out that this kingdom will 'itself endure for ever' (Dan. 2:44). Even Nebuchadnezzar himself will proclaim, 'his kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation' (Dan. 4:3).

145:13b–20. The Lord watches the vulnerable

The psalm celebrates God who keeps his promises and helps those who are vulnerable (*all who fall; all who are bowed down*, v. 14). He providentially supplies the needs of his creatures who look to him for help (vv. 15–16). He differentiates between those *who love him* and those who are *wicked*, taking care

of the former, but destroying the latter. In this he is a *righteous* (just, doing the right thing) God (v. 17a).

145:21. Praise God

The psalmist once again declares his commitment to praise God and then calls on all God's creatures to join him.

Meaning

Psalm 145 praises God as King and extols his glorious kingdom. All the earth is to praise the Lord who provides for his creatures. Christians using this prayer know that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed King, whose great acts in the past are his death and resurrection. He has established God's kingdom among us, and we look forward to him returning again in order to reign over all creation.

Psalm 146. The Lord reigns forever

Context

The final doxology of the Psalter (Pss 146 – 150; see Introduction: Organization, pp. 33–36) begins with the call to praise the Lord (*halělû yāh*). God protects his righteous and vulnerable people, while thwarting the lives of the wicked. This hymn proclaims God as King (v. 10) and has a liturgical feel to it, as the psalmist (*I* in v. 2) calls on the community (*Zion*, v. 10) to join in the worship.

Comment

146:1. *Halělû yāh*

The psalmist calls on himself (*my soul*, Ps. 103:1) to worship God. Psalm 146 is the first of the final five psalms which begin and end with the call to *praise the LORD* (*halělû yāh*).

146:2–9. *God defends the vulnerable*

The psalmist will praise God all his life (v. 2). After all, human leaders cannot help, so it is better to put one's confidence in God than in them. They are mortal (v. 3a) and will die, and their *plans* will die with them. On the other hand, God is the Creator of everything (v. 6), and so he is a deserving foundation for our hope. In particular, he defends those who cannot defend themselves (*the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the blind, those who are bowed down, the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow*). He loves the *righteous*, but will undermine the wicked.

146:10. *The Lord reigns*

The psalm ends with the proclamation of God's universal and eternal kingship. The psalmist calls on the community of God (*Zion*) to join in the praise.

Meaning

The psalmist leads the community in praise of God the King, who blesses his vulnerable people. He is the Creator and thus able to help, even when human leaders (*princes*, v. 3) cannot or will not.

Jesus, the Son of God and Messiah (King), helped the vulnerable. He upheld the cause of the oppressed, gave food to the hungry, set the prisoner free, gave sight to the blind and lifted those who were bowed down. According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus cites Isaiah 61:1–2 in a way that proclaims that he is the Messiah who helps those who are oppressed and downtrodden (Luke 4:18–19). Thus, the psalm can be read as a call to praise Jesus.

Psalm 147: How fitting to praise God

Context

The second psalm of the concluding doxology (Pss 146 – 150) opens and closes with a resounding *Praise the LORD* (*halělû yāh*). The psalmist calls on the community to praise God, providing motivation for that praise in God's power, wisdom, provision and protection of his people. In verse 2, the psalmist says that God *builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel*, probably indicating that the psalm was composed in the post-exilic period and celebrated the return from Babylon.

Comment

147:1. *Halělû yāh*

The psalmist calls on the congregation to worship God. Such worship is *good*, *pleasant* and *fitting*, indicating that his people are made for such praise. Praising God is what we were created to do. As a result, we experience joy when we praise him. The phrase *sing praises* (*těhillâ*) could also be understood to refer to singing psalms, since the book of Psalms is known in later Hebrew tradition as the book of praises (*těhillîm*; Kidner 1973: 485).

147:2–6. *God builds up Jerusalem*

The next stanza provides reasons for worship. God is all-powerful and all-wise (v. 5), and he manifests his attributes in concrete ways. He gathers the *exiles* and builds up the holy city of *Jerusalem* (v. 2; see *Context* for the possible historical setting of this psalm). Many of the returned exiles would have struggled emotionally (*broken-hearted*), but God takes care of them. If God knows each of the myriad of stars in the sky personally (*calls them by name*), he would certainly know every individual among his hurting people. God helps those who cannot help themselves (*the humble*), but he brings down the *wicked*.

147:7. *Sing to the Lord*

The psalmist again appeals to the community to worship God with praise. This time he calls for musical accompaniment.

147:8–9. God provides

A second motivation is given to praise God: he provides the rain that makes the grass grow, which in turn feeds the animals, both those living on the land (*cattle*) and those in the air (*ravens*). In Job 38 – 39, God sets Job in his place by describing how he maintains the weather and cares for the animals.

147:10–11. God loves those who fear him

God does not care about human appearance (1 Sam. 16:7) or skill. He could not care less about the ability of any of his creatures (*the strength of the horse*). What he desires are people who fear him and put their hope in his *unfailing love* (or loyalty; *hesed*). Fear of God is not the type of emotion that causes someone to run away, nor is it mere respect. It is the emotion that causes our knees to knock and our heads to bow. To fear God is to acknowledge his supremacy and one's own subservient position, and to place one's hope in God, rather than in oneself. God's unfailing love refers to his loyalty that emanates from the covenant: he promises to be their God and they will be his people.

147:12. Extol the Lord

Again, the psalmist encourages the congregation (*Jerusalem; Zion*; see Ps. 146:10) to praise God.

147:13–20. God provides

The psalmist concludes with a long series of further motivations to praise God, and then a final exhortation to do so (*Praise the LORD*, v. 20c). *God blesses Jerusalem by strengthening its defences. The gate was the most vulnerable part of the city, and the bars are what held the gates in place to keep enemies out. In a series of taunts directed at the city of Nineveh, Nahum says, 'The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies; fire has consumed the bars of your gates' (3:13). Security extends beyond the city to the borders of the nations. The people who live within its borders have plenty of food (the finest of wheat).*

Returning to the topic of verse 8, the psalmist again pictures God as controlling the weather by the power of his word. He is the One who brings snow and frost as well as hail. But then he commands them to melt, bringing flowing water that produces fertility.

Of course, the weather affects all of God's world, but it is to his people (*Jacob/Israel*) alone that he has revealed his law that describes his will. The law of God (see Ps. 119) is the final reason for praise given by the composer.

Meaning

This hymn praises God for a myriad of reasons. He is powerful and wise. He is in control of nature. He cares for the animals as well as his people, particularly the exiles. He is just, in that he sustains the humble, but brings down the wicked. He protects his people after returning them from exile, and gives them his law.

Psalm 148. The whole cosmos praises God

Context

The third hymn in the final doxology (Pss 146 – 150) calls on the whole cosmos to praise the Lord. This psalm exhorts the heavens and its inhabitants (vv. 1–6), the earth and its inhabitants (vv. 5–12) and then finally Israel (vv. 13–14) to worship God.

Comment

148:1–6. O heavens, *halĕlû yāh!*

The psalmist calls on the heavenly hosts to praise the Lord (*halĕlû/halĕlû yāh*), including the heavenly chorus of *angels* and the heavenly bodies (*sun, moon, stars*). The *waters above* the skies are the waters ‘above’ (see Gen. 1:6–8), which account for the blue sky and the rain that falls to the earth.

Heaven and its inhabitants should praise the Lord, because God created them by his command, as we read in Genesis 1. Their very existence, as well as their continued existence, depends on God’s decree.

148:7–12. O earth, *halĕlû yāh!*

While the first stanza calls on God’s heaven and its inhabitants to praise him and gives the motivation for their worship, the second stanza urges God’s earthly creation to join in the praise. The creatures that live in the sea (*great sea creatures*, v. 7b), *birds* (v. 10b), land animals (v. 10a), trees (v. 9b), mountains (v. 9) and even the weather (v. 8) should join in the chorus. Finally, humanity is called to join with the rest of creation in the worship chorus. Both those who are high-born (v. 11), as well as the rest of humanity, should praise God (vv. 11–12).

148:13–14. O Israel, *halĕlû yāh!*

In particular, God’s special people (*the people close to his heart*), Israel, should praise God. First, they should worship him because he is wonderful (v. 13bc), but especially because he has raised up for his people a *horn*. A horn symbolizes strength (1 Sam. 2:1, 10; 2 Sam. 22:3; Pss 18:2; 89:17, 24; 92:10; 112:9; 132:17; Jer. 48:25),¹⁶⁷ but the specific reference here is difficult. Does this refer to the strength of the people, or to God’s choice of an individual who would exercise

strength on behalf of his people? We cannot be certain. The psalm ends with a final call to praise the Lord (*halělû yāh*).

Meaning

The psalm calls on the whole cosmos, above and below, to praise God. All of God's creatures should join in the chorus, for God created and sustains them all. In particular, Israel should praise God because he has raised a horn for them. Broyles is right to reject the idea that 'horn' here refers to a king or a military leader. On the basis of the parallelism with 'the praise of all his faithful servants', he correctly points out that 'the liturgy of this hymn thus draws the congregation to exercise power not in a political or militaristic fashion but by means of praise' (Broyles 1999: 516).

Psalm 149. A sword in their hands

Context

The fourth in the series of hymns beginning and ending with *halělu yāh* finds its setting within the context of warfare. It is a victory song (see commentary on v. 1) in which the psalmist proclaims readiness to execute the judgment of God on wicked rulers and their nations.

Comment

149:1. *Halělu yāh*

After the opening call to praise the Lord (*halělu yāh*), the psalmist urges the congregation of God's people (*the assembly of his faithful people*) to sing a *new song* to God. New song occurs elsewhere in the Psalms (33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9), as well as in Isaiah (42:10) and the book of Revelation (5:9; 14:3), in contexts connected to warfare. A new song is a hymn of victory sung after God has made all things new by his defeat of the forces of evil.

149:2–5. *Let Israel praise God*

Most of this stanza contains further calls for God's people to join in worship (vv. 2–3, 5). He deserves Israel's praise because he is their *Maker* and their *King*. Their praise should be enthusiastic and participatory, as they dance, play instruments and sing to him. They are to praise God continually, even when they are in *their beds* ready to go to sleep (v. 5b). Why should they praise him? He gives them victory.

149:6–9. *Praise God in battle*

If there was any doubt that this is a psalm whose original setting was warfare, that doubt is dispelled by the final stanza. The people are to praise God with their mouths, while wielding a *double-edged sword*. The purpose of their warfare was to carry out the *sentence*, presumably issued by God, against other nations. The characterization of this warfare as an act of *vengeance* (v. 7a) indicates that the nations had perpetrated harm against Israel and this was their punishment. Perhaps we are to envision a scenario similar to that in the opening stanza of Psalm 2, which pictures the nations conspiring against the Lord and his anointed

king. Executing God's judgment against sinful nations brings God's people glory. The psalm ends with a final call to praise the Lord (*halēlû yāh*).

Meaning

Although hard for a modern audience to understand, this hymn celebrates God giving his people victory as they carry out God's sentence against those who have harmed his people. Thus, this psalm joins many others whose original setting was in the context of warfare.^[168] Jesus told his followers through Peter to put away their swords, but the New Testament also consistently informs Christians that they are in the midst of a battle. This battle is not 'against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Eph. 6:12). While a physical double-edged sword does not help in this battle, Paul tells us that we are to wield 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Eph. 6:17). We are mindful of our spiritual battle, and so Psalm 149 remains an important model prayer for Christians as we sing our new song today. We are also mindful that Christ will come again with a sword in his mouth (Rev. 19:15), when he will bring victory over all God's enemies and his people will once again sing a new song (Rev. 5:9; 14:3).

Psalm 150. Final doxology

Context

Psalms 146 – 150 provide a fitting conclusion to the book of Psalms, and Psalm 150 is intentionally the final psalm of the entire collection. We have earlier commented (see Introduction, p. 35) on how Psalms 146 – 150 with their opening and closing calls to *Praise the LORD* provide a doxology to the whole book. Psalm 150 heightens the call to praise and sends the reader out of the book in a joyful attitude of worship.

Like Psalms 146 – 149, 150 opens and closes with the exhortation to *Praise the LORD*, the simplest of all the expressions of exuberant praise. Between the opening and closing of this inclusio, there are five bicola that conclude with a climactic monocolon. Both cola of the five bicola also begin with *halēlû yāh*, while the monocolon concludes with the phrase. Thus, the psalmist instructs his hearers, presumably fellow worshippers, thirteen times in as many cola to praise the Lord. However, it is a mistake to divide the exhortation to praise from the actual performance of praise. *Praise the LORD* charges others to engage in worship while engaged in the act of worship itself.¹⁶⁹

Comment

150:1. The place of praise

The psalmist opens by singing *Halēlû yāh*, *Praise the LORD*, which is mirrored by the same phrase at the end of the psalm. In this way, the psalmist praises God in the act of encouraging others to join in worship.

After this opening praise, the psalmist continues to call on the congregation to praise God, and he begins by specifying the place of worship. The first colon of the opening parallel line calls on people to praise God in his ‘holy place’. The NIV understands the holy place to be the *sanctuary*, which is probably correct, although it could be a reference to God’s heavenly abode. The second colon does indeed call for praise from his *mighty heavens*. A literal translation of this phrase would be ‘his mighty firmament’, which is a reference to the solid dome (*rāqîa’*) that holds up the heavenly waters and is mentioned most famously in Genesis 1:7. If ‘holy place’ does refer to the sanctuary, then the first colon calls on God’s people to praise him, while the second colon instructs God’s angelic creatures

and the celestial bodies to praise him (see also Ps. 148:1–4). All heaven and earth are to praise God.

150:2. The reasons for praise

Most psalms give specific reasons that motivate the worshippers to praise God. This psalm concentrates on simply praising God. However, verse 2 does give general reasons for praise. The Hebrew may be understood in one of two ways. First, the reference might be to God's qualities of strength and greatness, while the other possible translation (that taken by the NIV) would point more concretely to God's mighty acts in history. Of course, God's qualities of strength and greatness demonstrate themselves to us as acts in history. While some psalms (e.g. Ps. 136) refer to specific acts in history, such as the exodus and conquest, this psalm is content to refer to God's concrete actions in a general way. While Terrien, on the basis of verse 1, says that the intended reference is to God's acts of creation here (Terrien 2003: 929), it is better to think that the psalmist intends to recall his redemptive acts as well as his work of creation.

150:3–5. The means of praise

The longest stanza simply calls for the employment of instrumental music and dance in order to enhance the praise of God. While some of these instruments are rarely, if ever, said to be used in worship elsewhere in Scripture, there is no reason to regard this accumulation of instruments as strange or eccentric. Rather, the poet is piling up a number of instrumental names in order to communicate that the whole orchestra is involved in this crescendo of praise. Goldingay provocatively suggests that these instruments include those 'that would be played by the priests (the horn), by Levites (harp, lyre, cymbals) and laypeople (tambourine, strings, pipe)' (Goldingay 2008: 748). The whole panoply of instruments is engaged: wind, string and percussion.

Of course, the impressive list of musical instruments reminds us that Psalm 150 was sung; indeed, all the psalms were sung. The psalms appeal to more than the intellect. They also arouse emotions, stimulate the imagination and appeal to the will. Music enhances the arousal of emotion.

150:6. An invitation to praise

Before the closing *halēlû yāh* that repeats the opening call to worship, the psalmist ends not with an imperatival call to praise, but a cohortative invitation. Until now, the psalmist has called for praise using musical instruments, but he

concludes with the most important instrument of all, the human voice. Mays rightly points out that the psalm presents not only the ‘possibility’ but also the ‘responsibility of praise’ (Mays 1994: 450). The Hebrew word for ‘breath’ (*něšāmā*) is used in Genesis 2:7 and reminds us that God gave humans the breath with which they praise him. Indeed, there is no more important use of that breath than to worship God.

Meaning

In the Introduction (Organization, p. 35), we described the book of Psalms as a literary sanctuary, a holy textual place where worshippers speak in the very presence of God. The primary setting for the use of the Psalms was the physical sanctuary. While Psalm 1 was the gateway into the literary sanctuary, Psalm 150 concludes the final doxology. Although we resisted the idea that there is a strict organization to the book of Psalms, we did observe that there is a movement from lament to praise, from the beginning to the end of the book. Psalm 150 encourages an utter abandonment to the joyful expression of praise.

Psalm 150, though not completely devoid of reasons for praise, is unique in the Psalter for its emphasis on unalloyed praise, an emphasis on emotion rather than reason. This psalm is also significant in reminding us that praise is most natural in congregational settings. We can praise God alone, but we should join our voices with others in celebration of God. Such praise moves a person away from self-absorption, first by focusing on God and secondly by fellowship with other worshippers (Hutchinson 2005: 85–100). The book’s final exhortation in Psalm 150 is: ‘Praise the Lord’, meaning that worship extends beyond the present into the future, even after leaving the sanctuary.

1. The lack of a verse number for the titles in English translation means that there is a difference of one or occasionally two verses between a citation of the Hebrew text and the English text. In this commentary we cite only according to the versification in the English.
2. For a game attempt, see Brueggeman, in Longman and Enns (2008: 616–617).
3. Longman (2012: 38–44).
4. Perhaps as late as the first century BC. Scrolls from the Dead Sea (dated between the third century BC and the first century AD) show a different order from the one in our English Bibles (based on the Massoretic tradition), but we cannot be certain whether or not these scrolls are ordered for special liturgical reasons.
5. Personal communication.
6. For other attempts, see Creach (1996); Mitchell (1997); Howard (1997); Cole (2000).
7. That Pss 1 and 2 do not have titles is an indirect indication that they are serving as introductions to the book.
8. For the language of orientation (hymns), disorientation (laments) and reorientation (thanksgiving songs), see Brueggemann (1995: 3–32).
9. For which, see Watson (1984) and selected articles in Longman and Enns (2008).
10. See Pss 15; 24:3–4 for an answer to the question of who may enter the holy sanctuary.
11. Proverbs vilifies the mocker in Prov. 9:7, 8, 12; 13:1; 14:6.
12. A number supplied by the famous medieval rabbi Maimonides.
13. See Johnston (2002: 227–228) for his comments on Ps. 1, where he says that to think that the psalmist has a notion of the afterlife here ‘reads too much into the psalm’.
14. Translation is from Longman (2006: 133).
15. An older terminology would name them ‘synonymous parallel lines’.
16. V. 12 is difficult, as one can observe by comparing the NIV (kiss his son) with the NRSV (‘kiss his feet’). The first translation finds it difficult to explain the Aramaic bar for ‘son’ when the Hebrew ben has been used earlier in the psalm (v. 7). The NRSV translation accepts the idea that ‘the two last words of v. 12 are to be exchanged’ (Kraus 1988: 125), and the emendation results in the translation ‘on the feet’ for ‘son’. Such a reading is too speculative to be definitely accepted. Fortunately, either translation expresses the need for submission – in the NRSV to Yahweh, and in the NIV

to the divinely appointed king.

17. See also the list of blessings found in Deut. 27 – 28.
18. Or (as the NIV note indicates) ‘seek lies’. Here the translators prefer the more concrete ‘worthless idols’, probably because that translation fits better with the verb ‘seek’.
19. Goldingay (2006: 123) surprisingly argues that both meanings could be intended here, which seems unlikely.
20. However, admittedly, the verb ‘heal’ (rp’) can be understood metaphorically as ‘restore’.
21. Cush can refer to a region south of Egypt, typically associated with Ethiopia but more likely with Sudan. Here, however, Cush is identified as a Benjaminite, so it is unlikely to be a geographical reference (contra Goldingay 2006: 144).
22. Alternatively, this passage may suggest that the psalmist is charged with a specific crime and his trial is held in the sanctuary according to the process described in Deut. 17:8–13 (thanks to David Firth, personal communication).
23. For the possibility that these verses refer to the enemy and not God, see Firth (2005: 25–27).
24. With the NRSV, the NIV has disillusionment. Both are possible for Hebrew *seger*, but the former (‘lies’) fits the context better. The wicked do not seem disillusioned, but they do lie.
25. And perhaps an unnecessary harmonizing with the book of Hebrews’ quotation of the Septuagint in Heb. 2:5–10.
26. For the best discussion of the intertextual relationship between Ps. 8 and Job, see Kynes (2012: 63–79).
27. Translations from Job are taken from Longman (2012).
28. See also Eph. 1:22 and Heb. 1:13, although these may also be references to Ps. 110:1.
29. Divine remembrance is more than an act of cognition, and implies God’s springing to action (Childs, 1962).
30. Wilson (2002: 286) argues slightly differently that the psalm is a ‘wisdom meditation and instruction...that has been converted into a communal lament and plea for the deliverance of Israel from exile by the addition of a final verse (14:7)’.
31. Thanks to David Firth for this insight (personal communication).
32. See discussion of these verses in Longman (2006: 568–569).
33. For instance, Goldingay (2006: 233) says that v. 11 asserts: ‘Yhwh will open up a way that leads to life rather than ending in premature death’

- (italics mine).
34. Going with the NIV. It is possible that the word here translated ‘just’ (šedeq) is in reference to God and thus part of the invocation: ‘O righteous Lord’, or may refer to the psalmist himself: ‘Hear a righteous man, O LORD.’ VanGemerén (2008: 194) rightly points out that the parallelism supports the NIV rendition.
 35. Or so the NIV (2011), which takes a different tack from NIV (1984) and the NLT. The Hebrew is very difficult (for a helpful discussion of the issues involved, see VanGemerén 2008: 200; Broyles 1999: 101). The earlier NIV and NLT take the Hebrew as a blessing on the righteous and their children, but it is more likely that the NIV (2011) is closer to the intention of the Hebrew.
 36. This is the only occurrence of the verb in the qal; typically it is in the piel/pual form.
 37. Actually, two words are used for ‘rock’ in this verse. In v. 2a the Hebrew is sela’, and in v. 2b it is šûr, but they are used interchangeably here and elsewhere as a metaphor for God’s protection, permanence, strength and stability.
 38. ‘It usually refers to a natural fortress or cave that could serve as a place of refuge’ (NIDOTTE 3: 1069).
 39. For a comprehensive analysis of the Divine Warrior theme in the Bible, see Longman and Reid (1995).
 40. The Canaanite storm god Baal is often called ‘the cloud rider’ in the Ugaritic mythological texts.
 41. For New Testament uses, see Meaning.
 42. Literally, the ‘many waters’, a phrase that occurs over twenty-five times in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Ps. 74:13–14; Isa. 17:12–13), referring, as here, to the powers of chaos.
 43. The Hebrew has literally ‘exalted eyes’, used in Ps. 131:1 to refer to someone who has a proud demeanour.
 44. Contra Guillaume (2010: 38), who takes the Hebrew šôr (translated ‘wall’ by the NIV) as ‘bull’, a reference to the ancient practice of bull-leaping, and thus indicating ‘agility, vitality and courage’ (p. 43).
 45. Goldingay (2006: 321 and bibliography in footnote i).
 46. The table is a metonymy for a meal, so Riede (2010: 217).
 47. For a rich Christological reading of Ps. 23, see Green (2010).
 48. Notice, though, v. 5c, where the structure is called his sacred tent, so the temple (Heb. hêkāl) is perhaps used in reference to the tabernacle. The question has to do with the attribution of the psalm to David before the time

when the temple was built.

49. For translation and commentary, see Longman (2006: 470–471).
50. This is the view of Ginsberg (1935), discussed by Craigie (1972) and Cross (1950).
51. In ancient Israel, bones were seen as ‘frame and center of strength’ (Janowski 2013: 169).
52. Translation from Longman (2006: 491).
53. Translation from Longman (2006: 461).
54. Charlie Drew (personal communication).
55. There is, however, no line for the sixth letter, and the seventeenth letter is out of order, coming last (similar to Ps. 25).
56. Following the NIV translation of the verse. NRSV is typical of another approach when it renders: ‘Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts.’ The NIV takes the opening ‘oracle’ as short for ‘oracle of God’, and idiomatically, ‘I have a message from God.’ The issue concerns whether or not vv. 1–4 are a divine oracle that opens the psalm or the reflection of the psalmist himself. The negative assessment of the wicked remains the same.
57. The issue is whether ’el is a superlative or to be translated as ‘God’.
58. Jesus uses the image of a bird’s wings in this way in Matt. 23:37/Luke 13:34.
59. See the helpful discussion in Kwakkel (2010), who also mentions the interpretation that the wings refer to those of the cherubim who were envisioned as close to God in the Most Holy Place.
60. Proverbs do not give universal principles; see Longman (2006: 31–33).
61. The issue concerns the translation of the unexpected *ḥāyyîm* (‘living’). The older version of the NIV kept the text as is and understood ‘living’ in the sense of ‘vigorous’, while the more recent edition emended the text to *ḥinnām* (‘without cause’). A case could be made for the original rendering, since it does make sense in the context and does not require an emendation.
62. See Longman (1998: 61–65) for a full discussion of *hebel*.
63. For instance, the burnt offering produces smoke which is ‘an aroma pleasing to the Lord’ (Lev. 1:9).
64. It is God who has opened their ears; the Hebrew is literally: ‘ears you have dug for me’.
65. If we read this psalm as a royal psalm (with David as the author), then the reference may be more specifically to the law of kingship found in Deut. 17:14–20.
66. Although the NIV translates v. 9b as ‘I do not seal my lips’, a literal translation would be: ‘I do not withhold my lips’ – the verb is the same as

that used in v. 11a (kl').

67. The word (dal) can also be translated 'poor', but the rest of the psalm seems to focus on illness rather than poverty.
68. Notice the same negative reaction to remembrance of God in Ps. 77:6–8.
69. Similar to the second act of remembrance in Ps. 77:10–20.
70. Alternatively, Mount Mizar could be translated 'little mountain'.
71. Janowski (2013: 169) points out that bones were seen 'as frame and center of strength'.
72. In agreement with Goldingay (2007), who points out that the circumstances described in 2 Kgs 15, 2 Kgs 18 and Joel 1 represent the kind of situation for which the psalm would be relevant.
73. As the NIV footnote indicates, shields ('ăgālôt) is a difficult word and might indicate chariots, although in either case the same point is made.
74. The NRSV represents the main alternate translation: 'Mount Zion, in the far north'.
75. Described in Jacobsen (1987: 377–385); Longman (2005: 43).
76. Translated by Kramer in ANET, 582–583.
77. For Jesus as the fulfilment of the temple (and tabernacle), see Longman (2001: 25–74).
78. For this meaning of bēnê 'ādām and bēnê 'îš, see *NIDOTTE* 1: 266.
79. By emending 'brother' ('āḥ) to 'surely' ('ak), the REB renders: 'Alas! No one can ever ransom himself.'
80. For translation and commentary, see Longman (2006: 250–251).
81. See Johnston (2002: 202–204).
82. Estes (2011: 133) argues that 'spirit' in Ps. 51 always means the human spirit, so he understands this reference as 'a desire for your [God's] holiness'.
83. An olive tree can live for hundreds of years.
84. The NIV appears to be following a suggestion by Dahood (1974: 46), but he never suggests a cognate for the relevant word (nôd) and bases his whole argument on an old understanding of parallelism, as if the second colon just repeats the thought of the first colon (See Introduction: Poetic style, pp. 42–47).
85. See also Heb. 13:6, although it is specifically citing Ps. 118:6–7.
86. In the story found in 1 Sam. 24, David discovers Saul in a cave.
87. Jesus uses the image of a bird's wings in this way in Matt. 23:37/Luke 13:34.
88. See the helpful discussion in Kwakkel (2010), who also mentions the interpretation that the wings refer to those of the cherubim who were

envisioned as close to God in the Most Holy Place.

89. For this meaning of *bēnê-’ādām* and *bēnê ’îš*, see *NIDOTTE* 1: 266 (also Ps. 49:2).
90. ‘One thing’/‘two things’ is a numerical parallelism, and it is not to be taken as if God spoke one thing and then heard two other things from another source. Rather, he is asserting that the two statements that follow both come directly from God.
91. The NIV seems to be taking ‘sea’ and ‘river’ as parallel terms both indicating the Sea of Re(e)ds. Goldingay (2007: 290) cites Ugaritic precedence for such an understanding, although he also acknowledges the possibility that the sea crossing can be used in parallel with the crossing of the Jordan River (see Ps. 114:3, 5), which seems the most likely option here.
92. The nature of blessing in the Bible can be recognized by looking at the blessings of covenant obedience as spelled out in passages like Deut. 28:1–14, as well as by reflecting on the nature of humanity’s original condition as described in Gen. 2.
93. Most translations place this rendering in the body of the text, with a footnote like that of the NIV which presents an alternative, depicting God as riding not on the clouds, but through the deserts (as in v. 7; see ESV for this alternative). As noted in the commentary, however, the cloud-riding theme is frequent in Divine-Warrior passages and is to be preferred here (see also v. 33).
94. Particularly that related to the god Baal, often designated the cloud rider in the Ugaritic myths.
95. Or perhaps, as in the NIV footnote, ‘the desolate in a homeland’, but in either rendition God is taking those who are cut off from social ties and the web of relationships.
96. Although the latter might be a reference to Bashan, a region known for its cattle (Wilson 2002: 942).
97. There might also be a wordplay between ‘song’ (*šîr*) and ‘bull’ (*šôr*) at work in this section. My thanks to David Firth for this suggestion.
98. Sign (*môpēt*) can have a positive (as taken here; see also Weiser [1962: 491]) or negative sense (as taken by Hossfeld and Zenger [2005: 196] and Kraus [1988: 652]). If the latter sense is meant, then the idea is that the psalmist’s present suffering has made him appear as if he is the target of God’s anger.
99. Tarshish is best understood as a reference to a geographical location in southern Spain, and thus the most westerly location that could be imagined by an ancient Israelite.

- .00. Located in south-west Arabia (modern Yemen) and the home of the Queen of Sheba who marvels at Solomon's wisdom (1 Kgs 10:1–13; 2 Chr. 9:1–12).
- .01. A kingdom located in modern Eritrea and Ethiopia.
- .02. They even suggest that the development of this story into three kings is on account of the connection between the gospel story and the psalm (2005: 220).
- .03. Indeed, Proverbs teaches that the prosperity of the wicked will not last (Prov. 11:4, 18; 13:11), although whether this also refers to the afterlife or only to this life is also debated in Proverbs (see Longman 2006: 86–87, 250–253, 280, 321, 406, 439, 440).
- .04. Perhaps by the time of the final redaction of the book of Psalms, but certainly by the time of the New Testament (see discussion in Johnston 2002: 204–206).
- .05. Perhaps a less monetary term like 'acquired' is more appropriate. Indeed, the verb might be from qānâ II rather than qānâ I and translated 'created long ago' (see Mays 1994: 246).
- .06. Or 'tribe' (šēbet).
- .07. Job 41 uses God's superiority over Leviathan to make the same point. See also Isa. 27:1. The figure of the seven-headed sea monster also lies behind the sea beast that represents evil in Rev. 13.
- .08. The book of Numbers is the story of the punishment on the first generation who left Egypt and of hope for the second generation. The story of the first generation ends with Num. 25, and with the second census account (see the first in Num. 1) in Num. 26 the book turns its attention to the second generation who will hear Moses' final sermon (as recorded in Deuteronomy) before going into the land, led by Joshua.
- .09. Ham (v. 51b) is the ancestor of Mizraim (the Hebrew name for Egypt) according to Gen. 10, and thus another name for Egypt. Ham was the son of Noah (Gen. 10:6) who offended his father when his father was vulnerable and needed his son's protection (Gen. 9:18–29).
- l10. See Bouzard (1997: 180–182) for the view that the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem is not the background to the psalm.
- l11. Thanks to David Firth for this suggestion.
- l12. NIV translates zîz as insects here and in Ps. 50:11, although the word might mean 'creatures from the field' (see *NIDOTTE* 3: 525; similarly nrsv; nab; neb; njb). The fact that a wall would not have prevented insects from entering the vineyard might be an argument in favour of this alternative translation.
- l13. While some try to reconstruct the refrain in v. 14, Kraus (1993: 139) is right

to reject this idea, since it would break up the vine metaphor.

- l14. Hossfeld and Zenger (2005: 318) point out that a messianic reading of Ps. 80 is also found in the Aramaic Targum, which reads v. 17 ‘messianically, in the horizon of Daniel 7 and other texts’.
- l15. As the name implies, the festival occurred with the appearance of the new moon, which initiated a new month since Israel used a lunar calendar (Num. 10:10; 28:11–25). Amos 8:5 implies that no work was to be done on this day, and 1 Sam. 20 (vv. 5, 18, 24, 27) speaks of a special meal to mark the day.
- l16. If this phrase goes with the preceding one, then it may be a reference to the Israelites hearing a foreign language (Egyptian) while in bondage in Egypt.
- l17. An alternate explanation is that this is a reference to God’s theophany at Mount Sinai (see Exod. 19:18–19; 20:18; so VanGemeren 2008: 619).
- l18. Endor is not mentioned in the historical sources for this event. Perhaps this is a scribal error for En (or ‘spring of’) Harod (see Judg. 7:1).
- l19. Kraus (1993: 169), who rather believes it is an actual waterless valley, points out (and this is true with either a literal or figurative understanding) that ‘the conception expressed in these two verses belongs to the topicality of texts like Isa. 35:6ff.; 41:18ff.; 43:19; 48:21; Ps. 107:22’.
- l20. Or possibly that God’s vassal people (from the earth) exhibit faithfulness, while God (from heaven) meets them with righteousness.
- l21. Technically called a merism.
- l22. South-west of the Sea of Galilee in the Lower Galilee.
- l23. The highest mountain in Israel (9,200 ft) located in the very northernmost part of the country.
- l24. See Exod. 6:6; 15:6; Deut. 4:34 for the connection between God’s right hand and his power in battle.
- l25. There are no secrets from God (Heb. 4:12–13).
- l26. Proverbs, for instance, often associates wise behaviour with blessings such as long life.
- l27. Jesus uses the image of a bird’s wings in this way in Matt. 23:37/Luke 13:34.
- l28. See the helpful discussion in Kwakkel (2010)), who also mentions the interpretation that the wings refer to those of the cherubim who were envisioned as close to God in the Most Holy Place.
- l29. For translation and commentary, see Longman (2006: 371).
- l30. The exodus story refers to both Meribah and Massah, while the account in Numbers mentions only Meribah. The relationship between these two accounts is disputed.

31. There is a textual issue here. The written Hebrew text (the Ketib) says, 'It is he who made us, and not we ourselves' (so NIV footnote), but the early scribes understood this to be a mistake (lô not lō') for 'we are his' and suggested that reading (Qere).
32. The term 'cognitive environment' comes from Walton (2011).
33. The OT is never interested in a scientific description of cosmology or cosmogony. See Longman (2013).
34. The immediate antecedent is Dan. 7:13–14.
35. According to VanGemeren (2008: 781), 'the blessing is conditioned on pleasing the Lord'.
36. The psalm uses more than one word for salvation or rescue, including 'redeem' (gā'al, v. 2), 'deliver' (hiphil of n̄sl, v. 6), 'save' (hiphil of yš', vv. 13, 19) and 'bring out' (hiphil of yš', v. 28).
37. The most natural reading of these verses is that they are the words of the psalmist directed towards his enemy, not the quoted words of his enemy (contra Hossfeld and Zenger 2011: 128–129), contra n^{rsv}, which adds 'they say' in v. 6, making this a statement of the enemy.
38. It is possible that the superscription should be read 'To David' rather than 'Of David', although that is not the way it was understood at the time of the New Testament, nor is it in keeping with the formula in the other titles.
39. Waltke and Houston (2010: 500), who cite Hilber (2005).
40. See Firth (2009: 151–157) for the view that Saul is criticized for not waiting for Samuel, rather than because of some 'cultic irregularity'.
41. Though some suggest that 'verse 7 may allude to a ritual that was part of the Davidic king's coronation' (Broyles 1999: 415).
42. David Firth (personal communication) makes the intriguing suggestion that the statement that the Israelites were able to eat the produce of the land rather than manna immediately upon their circumcision is illustrative of the psalmist's claim that God 'provides food for those who fear him' (v. 5a).
43. Personal communication from David Firth.
44. Personal communication from David Firth.
45. The verb to 'cut down' here (mōl) is the same as the main verb indicating circumcision.
46. The NIV uses 'law' for this word, as well as tôrâ.
47. See Ps. 1:1, and for Proverbs, Longman (2006: 151–155).
48. See Ps. 25:1–3 for a fuller explanation of honour and shame.
49. Of course, young is a relative term. The word used here (nā'ār) is also used of Rehoboam's contemporaries (1 Kgs 12:10) at a time when Rehoboam was about forty years old.

50. For the history of interpretation and the different schools of thought, see Crow (1996).
51. However, the NIV has a footnote on ‘food’ that notes that ‘fuel’ is a possible alternative rendering. See the discussion in Longman 2012: 344, fn. 5.
52. Although ‘ascent’ here is prefixed by a lamed, the meaning seems to be the same.
53. A less likely scenario is that the mountains are the source of worry for the psalmist, as robbers were hiding in them as he travelled to Jerusalem (so Kidner 1975: 431). Kidner also considers the possibility that the mountains represent a refuge from trouble in place of God, which the psalmist rejects (see Ps. 11:1).
54. Personal communication from David Firth.
55. Moody (2013: 65).
56. The latter is also the view of Broyles (1999, 455), who situates the psalm during the Persian period when the Jewish people were allowed to return to the land, but were under the dominance of the Persians.
57. For translation and commentary, see Longman (2006: 535, 544).
58. See Longman (2003: 79–91) for the argument that the rewards and punishments of Proverbs are not guarantees or promises, but rather the best route to a desired conclusion.
59. There is a nice sound-based wordplay between the word ‘shame’ (yēbōšû from bôš) and ‘withers’ (yabēš).
60. So Alexander, *NIDOTTE* 3: 439, who cites Pss 69:2[3], 14[15]; Isa. 51:10; Ezek. 27:34.
61. Terrien (2003: 848) believes that Ephrathah should be emended to Ephraim here and understood as a reference to the place where the ark lodged (Shiloh) during the period before its capture by the Philistines.
62. For more, see Longman (2007).
63. Hilber (2009: 434) points out that ‘this metaphor may share in the ancient Near Eastern imagery of a winged solar disk’.
64. Hossfeld and Zenger (2011: 568), citing Pope John Paul II.
65. The blessings of the covenant in Lev. 16 and Deut. 27 – 28 can help us understand the nature of blessing in the OT.
66. The letter nun is missing, perhaps reflecting a textual issue.
67. The origin of the image is a synecdoche of an animal, such as a bull whose horns are a source of pride and power.
68. Longman (1984) points out that almost a third of the psalms were composed and used in the context of warfare.
69. So Goldingay (2008: 747), citing Mowinckel (1962: 83).